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A History

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DAMASCUS

Despite widespread interest in Damascus due to the Syrian Civil War, little has been written about the city in English. First published in 2004, Burns' *Damascus: A History* remains the only English language volume to offer a comprehensive overview of the archaeology, architecture and history of one of the oldest cities on Earth. Therefore the second edition of this work is to be warmly welcomed for the addition of a new chapter bringing the reader up to date with the current situation and offering us a timely reminder of the effects of the war on this exceptional and fascinating city.

Emma Loosley, University of Exeter, UK

Damascus, first published in 2005, was the first account in English of the history of the city, bringing out the crucial role it has played at many points in the region's past. It traces the story of this colourful, significant and complex city through its physical development, from its emergence in around 7000 BC through the changing cavalcade of Aramaean, Persian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Turkish and French rulers to independence in 1946. This new edition has been thoroughly updated using recent scholarship and includes an additional chapter placing the events of the Syrian post-2011 conflict in the context of the city's tumultuous experiences over the last century.

This volume is a must-read for anyone interested in the sweep of Syrian history and archaeology, and is an ideal partner to Burns' *Aleppo* (2016). Lavishly illustrated, *Damascus: A History* remains a unique and compelling exploration of this fascinating city.

Ross Burns was in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs for 37 years until his retirement in 2003, including as Ambassador to Syria from 1984 to 1987. After his retirement, he completed a PhD at Macquarie University in Sydney on 'The Origins of the Colonnaded Streets in the Cities of the Roman East'. He is the author of *Aleppo* (Routledge, 2016) and *Monuments of Syria* (3rd edition, 2009).

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Ross Burns

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The bounties of this world are in ten parts; nine of them are
in Damascus

(ibn `Asakir)



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FOREWORD

This book has had a long genesis stretching back almost four decades before this new edition. It would be impossible or foolhardy to attempt to name all those who have provided inspiration, information, encouragement or sustenance over those years or to provide orders of magnitude for their contributions. Many names were cited as direct sources of inspiration and scholarship in the first edition. I will not repeat them here but acknowledge the additional support in the satisfying work of revising for this new edition from the helpful comments of Stephen Bourke and James Barr who untangled some challenging periods when so much seemed to be going on in Damascus but so much that had already become wrapped in enigma.

This survey has been written in the hope it will be accessible to an informed reader not specialised in each or any of the various historical eras covered. I have used footnotes where it seems necessary to give more leads on the background to issues that require elaboration, where doubt or controversy still exists or to give credit to the original work of sources. The bibliography is given at length because of the great range of material necessarily consulted for a work covering so many eras with many titles added even in Damascus' recent troubled years. In the case of original (usually ancient) sources, I have not prescribed particular editions of works but use commonly accepted numbering systems where they exist.¹ Arab sources in translation are listed under the original writer's name except for Ibn 'Asakir whose description of Damascus was extracted from his massive work and edited by Nikita Elisséeff, under whose name it is listed.

The transliteration practice followed is totally indefensible; but then any system must be deficient to some extent. A 'non-system' which tries to use the most recognisable versions that have passed into accessible modern accounts seems the least likely to cause acute eye strain. Where a commonly accepted word is available, even if it is not manifestly the most correct guide to pronunciation (e.g. Saladin, Koran) I have used it. As many names from the Greek era have become more familiar to

readers in their Latin version, I usually opt for the latter. I employ the ‘*ain* (‘) or *hamza* (‘) where it aids accuracy. Q and K are not assigned consistently. Both are used for *kaf*, reflecting customary usage, but Q is reserved for *qaf*. All extracts from the Bible are given in the translation of *The New Jerusalem Bible*, London: Dartman, Todd and Longman, 1985. High religious titles are usually capitalised except when there were contested claims when caliph is used instead of Caliph.

Note

- 1 In the case of Josephus, however, both the classic Whiston system and the modern Loeb numbering systems (in brackets) are given.

ABBREVIATIONS

c.	circa, about
d.	died
gov.	governor, governed
nd	no date given
np	no publisher/place given
pl	plural
r.	ruled
?	(before a date or word) uncertain

AAAS	<i>Annales archéologiques arabes syriennes</i>
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
BAH	<i>Bibliothèque archéologique et historique</i>
BEO	<i>Bulletin d'études orientales</i>
DM	<i>Damaszener Mitteilungen</i>
E1	<i>Encyclopedia of Islam</i> , first edition, Leiden 1908–1934
E2	<i>Encyclopedia of Islam</i> , second edition, Leiden 2003 (CD edition)
IFEAD	Institut français des études arabes de Damas (previously Institut français de Damas)
IFPO/IFAPO	Institut français (d'archéologie) du Proche-Orient
MUSJ	<i>Mélanges de l'université St. Joseph</i> (Beirut)
PEFQ(S)	<i>Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly (Statement)</i>
SHAJ	<i>Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan</i>
ZDPV	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina Vereins</i>

INTRODUCTION

Many other things have I been told – and a good deal more I saw myself – which I shall not record. This is not from fatigue, but because many would not believe me and others would merely scoff.

*Niccolo da Poggibonsi O. F. M. Voyage Beyond the Seas (1346–1350)*¹

Four roads to Damascus

No one avenue of approach gives the full picture of how Damascus has won a precarious existence from its surrounding terrain. Suppressing the thought of today's frantic but prosaic taxi ride from the international airport, consider how the traditional visitor might arrive by any of four main routes, each suggesting a different facet of the city. The old route from Beirut, only 100 kilometres away, threads the jagged landscape of the narrow Barada Valley, suddenly delivering the traveller to the edge of the Ghouta Oasis via the Rabwe Gorge. Here the Barada River in its season makes a final dash for the plain, pouring out its life-granting waters in a tumultuous frenzy. From the mouth of the gorge, where the Koran says that Jesus and His Mother were given refuge,² the traveller looks down over the lush orchards and fields with the meadows in the distance giving way gradually to the wilderness, the whole punctuated by the slumbering minarets and domes of the city. Here the Arab traveller Ibn Jubayr in his 1184 description has the city beckon to the visitor as a bride: 'Come to the halting place of beauty and take the midday repose'.³ From the monument above, Qubbat al-Saiyar, Tamerlane surveyed Damascus for the first time before unleashing his destructive forces on the city in 1400.

An even starker contrast was the eastern approach from the desert. After weeks of slogging through the monochrome wilderness, suddenly the eye is feasted by the green fertility of the oasis emerging through the mirage. The senses reawaken,

2 Introduction

revelling in the sound of water and its cooling humidity. The fertility becomes all-enveloping until finally the city itself is reached, nestling against the harsh backdrop of the Anti-Lebanon range.

The third way is from the north, so often used by the city's conquerors. It is here that the Muslim general, Khalid ibn al-Walid, first looked down on Damascus from the slopes of the Qalamoun's triple escarpment and planted the flag of Islam to signal to its inhabitants that a new order was only a matter of time. Here Alexander's General Parmenion pushed on to Damascus through the snow-driving storm to relieve the Persian court of its treasures and concubines. In a pre-arranged plan, the city beckoned its conquerors as they descended the final escarpments of the Anti-Lebanon where today trucks and buses hurtle down the last stretch of expressway to the oasis with barely a touch of the brakes.

The fourth way has been barred to most travellers since the middle of the twentieth century. Before, however, so many of Syria's rulers had ascended another escarpment, the Golan, from the lowlands of Palestine. The last 60 kilometres were an easy ride across the flat volcanic plane, skirting the white-bearded peak of the Jebel al-Sheikh ('mountain of the sheikh' or Mount Hermon). Roman governors, Crusader kings, Ayyubid or Mamluk sultans used this approach to join the destiny of two of the great cities of the Levant – Damascus and Jerusalem.

The setting

The setting is important to this study. If there were no Barada River, there could be no Damascus. Nature or the rules of economics do not otherwise prescribe the city. It has no natural defences; has no ready access to the sea; is neither blessed with rich soils nor indulged by refreshing breezes or reliable soaking rains. This part of the Syrian steppe, in other words, could not of itself sustain settled life on any scale. Two assets alone – water and ingenuity – have won it a place on the edge of a harsh steppe.

South and east of Damascus the billiard-board flatness, broken by a few ridges, lava-strewn wildernesses and the occasional dead core of a volcano, stretches endlessly to Arabia. Looking out over this desolation, Damascus nestles before a barren curtain of mountains. Behind the city to the north lie the slopes of Jebel Kassyun, part of the forbidding spine of the Anti-Lebanon. This flinty range, touching 2000 metres, together with the even higher peaks of the Lebanon chain to the west, hides Damascus from the sea. A rare indentation in the mountain ramparts allows access to the Mediterranean, avoiding detours to the north or south of some 200 kilometres. Between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon ranges lies the extraordinarily fertile indentation of the Beqa'a Valley. This continues south as the Valley of the Jordan, descending below sea level. Its distinctive shape may have inspired in classical times the curious term 'hollow Syria' (Syria Coele) referring to the inland part of southern Syria. This indentation forms the western extremity of what has become known as the Fertile Crescent, that arc of cultivable land stretching from southern Palestine to Iraq. After following the Orontes

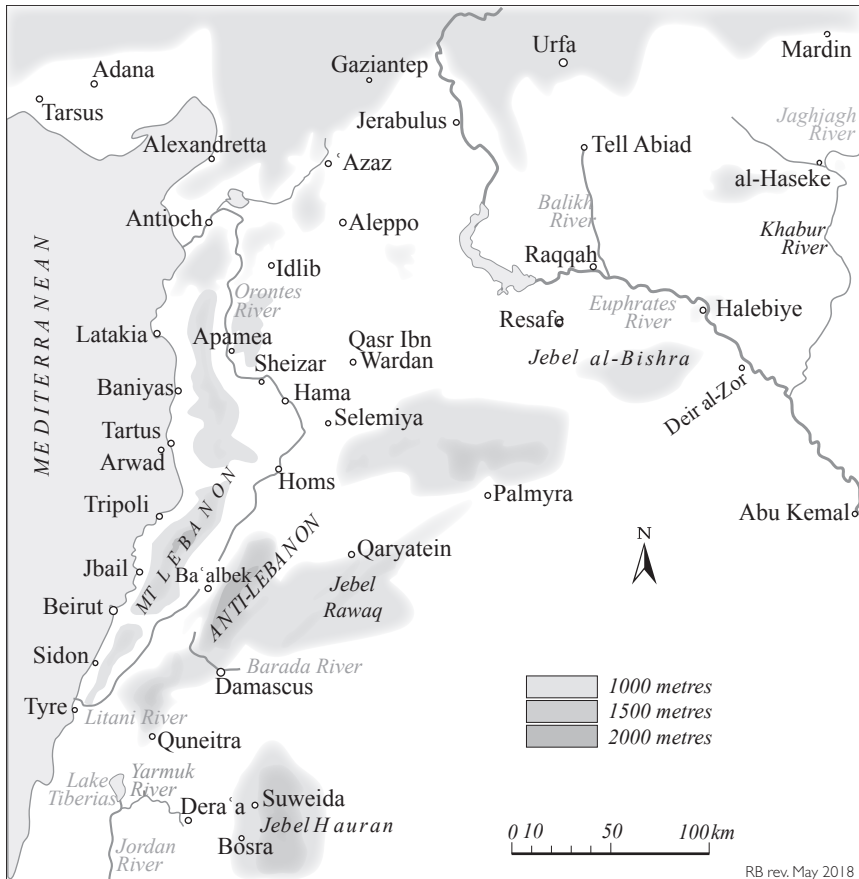


FIGURE 0.1 Land of Syria

north, the crescent is continued by the relatively fertile land watered by the run-off from the Anatolian highlands and joins the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers as they descend into lower Mesopotamia.

The great advantage of the Anti-Lebanon for Damascus is that it is high enough to trap some of the winter moisture-laden clouds from the Mediterranean before they evaporate over the steppe to the east and south. While the Damascus rainfall (220 mm per year⁴ is barely enough to sustain permanent agriculture, it is more than compensated by the precipitation stored on the snowy peaks and released into the Barada with the spring thaw. Even the Old Testament marvelled at the boundless flow of the Abana (Barada) in 2 Kings 5.12 – ‘Surely, Abana and Parpar, the rivers of Damascus, are better than any water in Israel?’. The stream is fed not only from the snow melt released in summer by the steep slopes but from the marshy lakes near Zabadani and by the abundant spring at ‘Ain al-Fijeh, half way along the river’s course (now largely siphoned off for the city’s drinking water).⁵

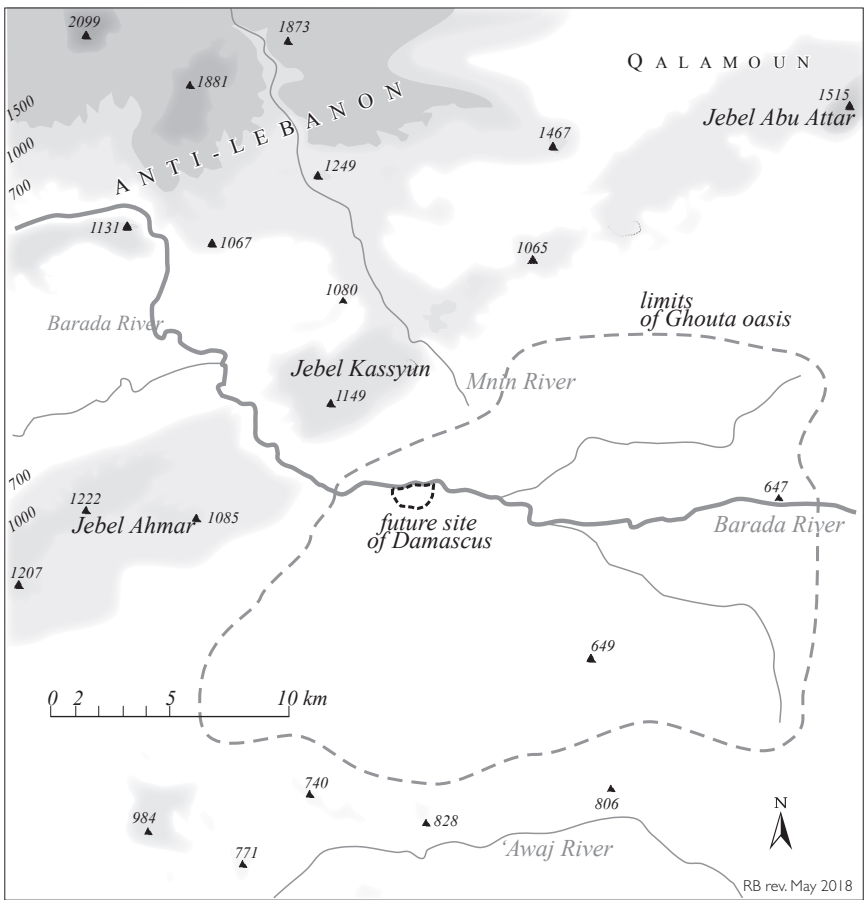


FIGURE 0.2 Geographical setting

Along with this supply of water, more generous than that which nature provides for any other city of the Levantine inland, Damascus is also blessed by a relatively mild climate – a short winter and a long summer which brings a reliable five months of unbroken sunshine.

The river ‘lavishes her life in the creation of a single city and straightaway dies in face of the desert’.⁶ In the beginning, before man intruded, the waters of the Barada simply rushed impetuously into the city down the confined gorge and, especially during the early summer flood, spilled onto the plain. The run-off either settled in low-lying swamps or evaporated through the marshes of Ateibe, east of the city. The Damascus basin drew minor supplementation from two other streams, the Mnin flowing out of the Anti-Lebanon behind Kassyun and the ‘Awaj (the Parpar of the Old Testament quote above) which flows from Mount Hermon and gouges on its eastward course a small valley marking the southern limit of the

oasis. It didn't take long during the prolonged summers with average temperatures over 35 degrees to dry out the extensive marshes, leaving only a few patches of fetid moisture. The oasis was a phenomenon that lasted merely part of the year. It was only human intervention over the past three millennia which tamed nature's extravagance to form a fertile environment that would enclose the city 'like the halo round the moon' in the words of ibn Jubayr.⁷

The different facets Damascus shows to its visitors reflect the varied forces that have played on its destiny. The Anti-Lebanon has been the baffle that has done much to shape that fate. Not high or extensive enough to be a permanent barrier, it has deflected the city's attention back towards the desert, away from the Mediterranean world 100 kilometres to the west where Beirut still beckons with its occidental lures. It is this inter-play between the western and eastern identities of Damascus which has provided it with such a rich history – one that so perfectly encapsulates the forces that have played over the Middle East as a whole from the earliest recorded times to the present.

Legends of a birth

When did Damascus begin to develop as an urban centre? A city as unique as Damascus with its complex history and its striking attributes attracts many legends. Any city that also lies in the heartland of three great religions invites even more. Some legends reach back to the beginning of recorded history. We will resist here the temptation to take them all literally, though many beautifully embellish the story of the city. In seeking the ancient origins, what better place to start than the Genesis of the Old Testament, respected by all three Faiths of The Book? As long ago as the first century AD the Jewish historian Josephus attributed the founding of Damascus to Uz, one of the sons of Aram, son of Shem, son of Noah.⁸ There are still many Damascenes who would lead you to the place where Adam was a boy or the spot where Cain killed Abel (confusingly located in at least two places – a cave ('al-Arba'in') on the slopes of Kassyun behind Damascus or a peak upstream along the Barada). There are plentiful legends associated with the village of Berze five kilometres north of Damascus where Abraham is supposed to have been born (ignoring his legendary origins in Mesopotamia). Even the Roman historian Nicolaus of Damascus has Abraham ruling in Damascus before his arrival in Canaan. Many modern writers like to play on these legends and the simple piety that nourishes them but the truth is we have no proof at all of these events. As described below, most represent devotional practices encouraged much later in the city's history with little sign of any continuing link with earlier traditions.

Nor does the name 'Damascus' provide us with much enlightenment. It is quite possibly older than any of the Semitic groups who adopted the name from previous inhabitants of the second millennium BC. Whatever the case, there is no obvious translation.⁹ The first reference to the town name is on a wall of the Karnak Temple in Egypt in an inscription of Thutmose III (c.1468). 'Dimaski' or 'Dimasqa' appears later in the Tell al-Amarna tablets.¹⁰ What the name might

refer to is even more puzzling.¹¹ ‘Mash’ (incidentally the name of one of the sons of Aram in Genesis 10.23) is possibly a reference to the sun, following a transposition of the consonant sounds. If so, the tradition is preserved in the current Arabic popular name for the city, ‘al-Shams’ (the sun).

It is not wise to be too iconoclastic in Damascus. As will be seen in these pages, the city was to have a deep and often troubled relationship with the events of the Bible and if later religious trends were to seek to link it to the earliest phases of the great Semitic legends, then that is not at all surprising – or indeed totally to be discounted. The relative proximity of Damascus to Jerusalem was often to bring it into conflict or collaboration with that great city holy to three faiths. In an age when ‘Damascus-Jerusalem’ carries loaded connotations, there will be a need to step out of that context to see the many similarities that bind the two cities as well as those that pit them against each other. Impermeable modern borders and cease-fire zones should not blind us to the fact that the two cities are only 200 kilometres apart and the territory between is relatively open. Much of that land – the present-day Golan; the Biblical Bashan; the historic grain-bowl of Roman Auranitis (Hauran); the box-seat castle sites along the slopes of Mount Hermon whose snowy profile watches over the route between them – has been contested numerous times between the masters of Damascus and Jerusalem. The two cities have been rivals since their conceptions and will remain so whoever controls them.

For want of a spade

Rather than recycling legends, however, this book attempts to trace the history of Damascus as shown in its physical development. In the course of the investigation, the city itself is the basic document. The story told here cannot be reconstructed simply by the careful sifting of ancient texts or inscriptions. ‘Only in the archaeological remains can you find the reflections of the city’s history. The evolution of the political structure is written in the architecture of Damascus. All its monuments only make sense as irrefutable witnesses of the city’s life’.¹² This is not an Alexandria or an Antioch that constantly held the fortunes of ancient rulers in its hands. Before the Arab period, the references to Damascus in written accounts are at best fragmentary. Whereas, for example, classical Athens is attested in hundreds of references in ancient authors (700 alone refer to the buildings of the *agora*) or thousands of inscriptions found in situ (7500, again in the case of the *agora*), Damascus scores but a handful of either.¹³

Unlike many cities of the ancient world, Damascus has not slumbered for centuries, awaiting the archaeologist’s spade under mounds of sand or mud. In Damascus, every layer of history has built precisely on top of its predecessor for at least three millennia. Whereas, for example, the forerunners of present-day Cairo shifted between various sites since Pharaonic times, Damascus has remained planted in one spot, a patch of land less than one by two kilometres. Modern investigative research has had few opportunities to dig the five metres of accumulated deposits to find clues as to what took place there over thousands of years.

Instead, the observer must rely on what survives on top of the layered cities of the past. The city itself is the main witness but it cannot be cross-examined. It reveals what it chooses – what today remains visible to the eye – no more. The challenge resembles a fascinating detective story that these pages seek to unravel.

Notes

- 1 Adapted from Bellorini and Hoade trans. 1945: 78.
- 2 Koran XXIII, 50.
- 3 Ibn Jubayr, Broadhurst trans. 1952: 271.
- 4 Forty-two-year average – Bianquis 1977: 36. Today's average is 203 mm per year.
- 5 Sadly the surviving remains of the shrine and small temple that graced the spring's outlet in Roman times are hidden beneath today's water bottling plant. It survived in fairly intact state when the English traveller, Pococke, sketched it in the mid-eighteenth century – Pococke: 1745: 135 & fig. XXII K & L. Today's remains are studied in Dentzer-Feydy 1999 and Aliquot and Piraud-Fournet 2008.
- 6 Jones 1931 (1966): 428.
- 7 Ibn Jubayr, Broadhurst trans. 1952: 271.
- 8 *Jewish Antiquities* 1, 6, 4 (145).
- 9 Pitard 1987: 7–10.
- 10 Klengel 1985: 50; Pitard 1987: 9; Mercer, Hallock (eds) *Tell al-Amarna Tablets* 1939 I: 223; Moran 1992: 126, 181, 275; Schürer 1973 II: 127.
- 11 Many fantasies have been woven around the possible references – a banquet for legend makers. Kraeling and Albright offered suggestions based on interpreting the 'di' component as referring to 'place' – 'mesheq' or 'place of gain' (Kraeling), a reference to its trading role; or 'place of reeds' (Albright), suggestions nowadays rejected. Kraeling 1918: 46 n.2; Albright 1941: 35.
- 12 Elisséeff 1970: 176.
- 13 Camp 1992: 15.



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PART I



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1

THE EMERGENCE OF DAMASCUS (9000–1100 BC)

The first villages

The modern picture of Bronze Age Syria is very much a tale of three cities – Mari, Ugarit and Ebla – all extraordinarily rich sites testifying to the sophistication of the culture of the times. Mari lies on the middle Euphrates not far from the present Iraq–Syria border. Ugarit is a couple of kilometres back from the Syrian coast, just north of Latakia, while Ebla lies 50 kilometres south of Aleppo. The first two have been dug by French expeditions: the exhaustive research over more than 80 years being a supreme tribute to the tradition of Napoleonic commitment to scholarship on a grand scale. These sites have given great insights into the formative influences that shaped Syria: Mari looking along the Euphrates towards the Mesopotamian world; while Ugarit, a later site, turning towards the Mediterranean and the great trading links that were later to knit Syria's destiny with the Aegean. Until Ebla's chance unearthing in the 1960s, there were few complementary insights into how the rest of inland western Syria had responded to these evolving influences.¹ The Italian expeditions at Ebla have begun to fill in this gap.

It has long been a self-fulfilling assumption that Damascus is a city older than time. The belief that this was one of the first urban centres appears a little fanciful as we have no evidence of any large-scale settlement on the site of the present walled city at least until the second millennium BC. There is certainly evidence of earlier settlement in the wider basin going back to 9000 BC but there is so far no consistent picture of how the Damascus area was exploited, though it seems to have been only lightly populated.² Even in the Bronze Age (after 3600 BC) there are no artificial mounds of any size in southern Syria (south of Homs) to match the numerous *tells* of northern or eastern Syria. The walled city's highest prominence rises no more than five metres, indicating that early settlement was both small in scale and limited in duration.³

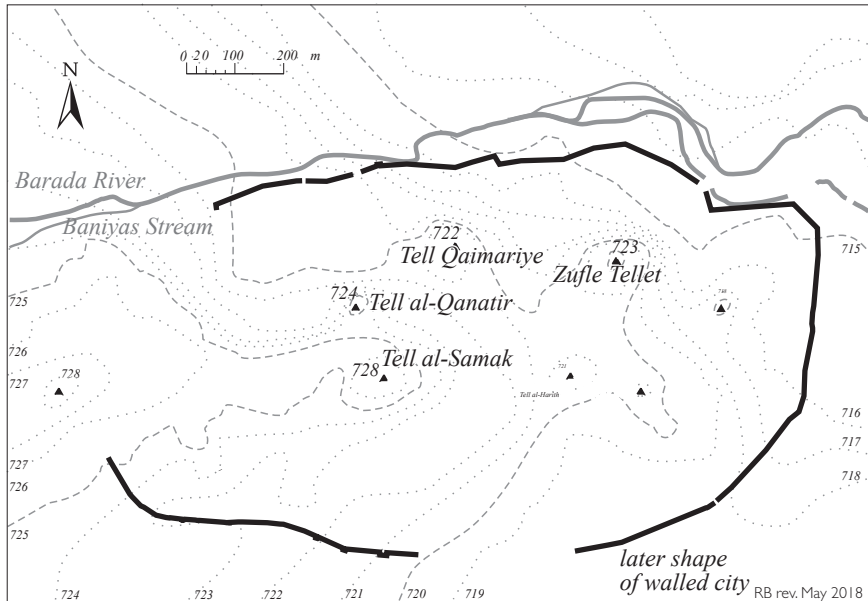


FIGURE 1.1 A ridge by the Barada

A handful of other sites show indications of Bronze Age (or earlier) settlement but those researched are limited in size and beyond the edge of the Ghouta Oasis. The exception is Tell al-Salihiye, 15 kilometres east of Damascus, which has yielded evidence going back to the Early Bronze Age.⁴ Tell al-Salihiye is a substantial artificial mound, 250 by 300 metres in extent, rising approximately 25 metres above the plain. Its location made sense for defensive purposes as it sits on a rise just north of the river, defending the natural approach from the desert. A defensive role might also apply to Tell Sakka, recently excavated by the Syrian antiquities authorities, five kilometres north-west of the international airport. Recent exploratory excavations in the Damascus Citadel have yielded pottery remains going back to the Early Bronze Age⁵ but structural evidence is too fragmentary to support any conclusions as to whether the site of the future Damascus amounted to more than a collection of hamlets scattered across a patchy oasis protected by defensive positions like Salihiye or the smaller settlements to the south along the Awaj River.⁶

The terrain, however, gives some indications as to why Damascus came into existence. The site as it was before the first millennium bc, the blank sheet on which the city's history will be sketched, is not entirely devoid of informative features. There are mountains to the north, the river descending from top left to bottom right, the land sloping away in the same direction. The elevation of the city is around 600 metres above sea level, enough for the cooling air on summer evenings to give some relief after the baking day. Its winter is usually mild with the occasional chance of snowfall. The slope of the plain is gentle, avoiding the need

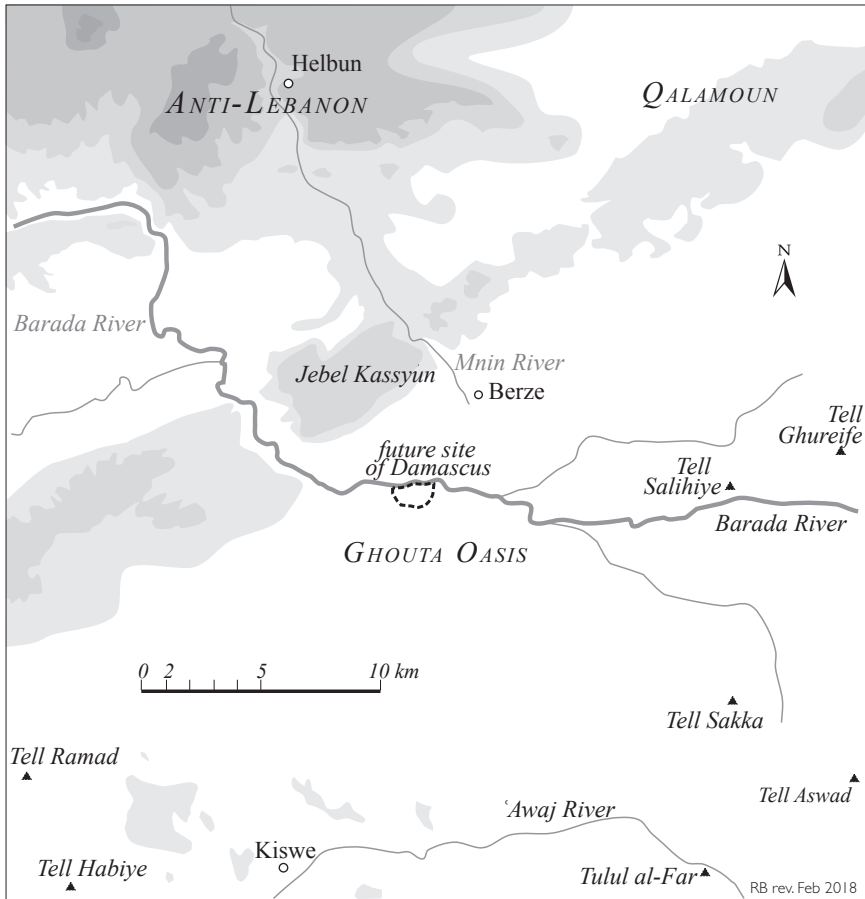


FIGURE 1.2 Ghouta in the Bronze Age

for elaborate terracing to contain the Barada waters before they trickle away. The natural stream of the Barada is initially confined before it fans across many arms spreading east and south. This irrigated zone extends to the east no more than 20 kilometres before the wilderness takes over. In fact, only the first ten kilometres is good agricultural land capable of bearing a full range of crops (the true Ghouta). The eastern marginal zone, al-Mardj, is a soggy meadow when the waters of the Barada reach it in the spring but only sparse pasture remains by the end of summer.⁷

The land on which the walled city of Damascus would come to be built offers no features favouring settled life on an urban scale. The site, a slight ridge dividing marshy breeding grounds, ideal for malaria and typhoid, has no advantages for urban development.⁸ It is not a natural position from which to protect the water-course of the Barada. There is, moreover, no prominent rise on which a citadel would logically be placed. During the revolution which brought settled agriculture

14 The emergence of Damascus (9000–1100 bc)

to the Fertile Crescent many thousands of years before Christ, the Ghouta lent itself only to small-scale development. Grain, fruits and livestock could be raised in the patches where water could be diverted by simple means. The full development of the area's potential had to await higher technology and organisational skills. The spring torrent could then be channeled beyond the edge of the steppe, extending the fertile season to the entire year, turning marginal soil into a prosperous garden.

Without the skill of man, the Barada would have continued to hollow out a sluggish bed through the centre of the Damascus depression; its valley would have been no more than a narrow ribbon of greenery in the midst of a parched steppe.⁹

Ta-ms-qu in Upi

No major power seems to have taken a sustained interest in the Damascus oasis before the second millennium bc. Its situation well to the south of the contested zone distanced it from the strategic rivalry that pitted Hittites against Mesopotamians. Egypt had for some centuries been occasionally interested in the Amorite states of southern Syria but was seen to have sporadically exercised cultural suzerainty of the area only from the nineteenth century bc, the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age. The Damascus oasis and environs then began to show signs of a flourishing new phase of development. The region had become sufficiently well known to have earned a place name recognisable to a wider audience. Upi or Upu, the land covering the Barada oasis, was recorded in Egyptian Execration Texts dated as early as the nineteenth century, long before the first specific reference to Damascus.¹⁰

Whatever sporadic interest the Middle Kingdom pharaohs may have exercised as far north as southern Syria, their successors of the New Kingdom saw the region as vital to their imperial ambitions. In the fourteenth century Damascus appears to have been a principal city of the region of Upi which changed hands from the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten to the Hittite ruler Suppiluliuma I.¹¹ Recent evidence may have partially filled in some of the picture of the Egyptian presence. Syrian excavations at Tell Sakka have now unearthed remains of a prestige residence on the edge of the Ghouta, obviously Egyptian inspired and inhabited.¹² While the present-day site of Damascus may not have been extensively developed, it seems possible that in the Late Bronze Age the wider Ghouta had become a focus for Egyptian interests with the Sakka palace then or later the seat of a high-status envoy or official.¹³ Tell Salihyie to the east continued to play an apparently dominant defensive role and may have monitored a trading route connecting Mesopotamia and Palestine.¹⁴

The decision by Egypt to play a more prominent role in the area turned the two-way struggle for Syria between the two states dominant in northern Syria, Mitanni and Hittites, into a three-way contest. By the mid-second millennium, Egypt sought to push out to the north a more permanent early warning perimeter to

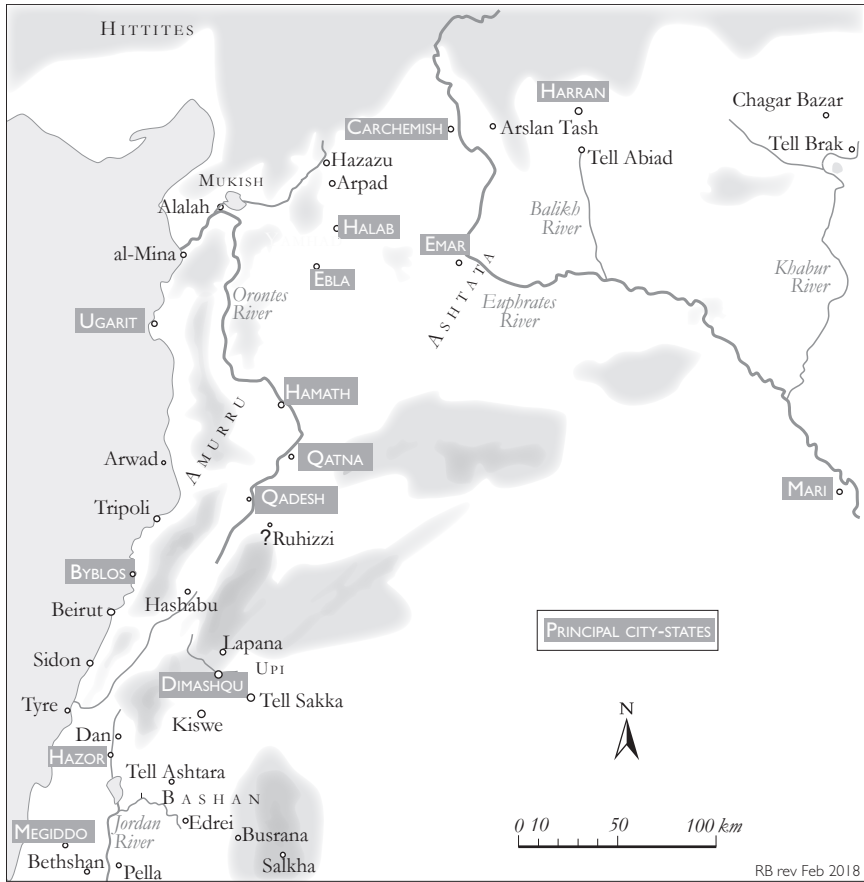


FIGURE 1.3 Syria in the Bronze Age

detect threats to the Nile Valley. Southern Syria was no longer dead ground in the struggle between empires but was ‘drawn into an ever-widening net of international connections and affiliations’.¹⁵ Pharaoh Thutmose III travelled north from Palestine to seek combat with Mitanni (first half of fifteenth century bc). His path north took him through the settlement of ‘Ta-ms-qu’, the first recorded mention of Damascus as a town, as noted earlier.¹⁶ More than a hundred years later, in the Amarna archives (second half of the fourteenth century), the territory of Upi is subordinate to Egypt and Ta-ms-qu is now cited as a major centre. The archives, however, still provide only geographical references with no indication of political status.¹⁷

This Egyptian campaign did not stop the Hittites from pressing their claim to as much of Syria as they could. Suppiluliuma (r.c.1344–1322 bc) came to the Hittite throne and pursued a more vigorous policy against the Hittites’ rivals in Syria. After campaigning against Mitanni across the Euphrates, he turned south towards Damascus around 1340 bc. However, his control seems to have been ephemeral,

an opportunistic gain made at a time when Akhenaten's reign had temporarily weakened Egypt's capacity to act outside the Nile Valley. Misunderstanding between the Hittite and Egyptian courts intensified after the murder of one of Suppiluliuma's sons who had been sent to wed the widow of Tutankhamen. Although Suppiluliuma was successful in installing a series of Hittite vassal kingdoms in northern Syria, his hold was less secure south of the Kingdom of Amka or Amki (based on the northern end of the Beqa'a Valley).

The mother of all battles

The frontier, however, remained an uneasy one and the contest was revived in the next century. Following the end of the Amarna period, Egyptian ambitions in Syria were again awakened under Horemhab who paved the way for a renewal under the Nineteenth Dynasty of Egyptian dreams of wider empire. Horemhab arranged to be followed by his protégé who came to the throne around 1295 BC as Ramses I, quickly to be succeeded by his son, Seti I. Seti too had great ambitions to restore wider Egyptian prestige, beginning in Syria, ambitions which were followed through after his death by his successor, Ramses II (?1279–1212 BC). Faced with the most formidable Egyptian leader for many generations, the Hittite king Muwatalli (r.1295–1272 BC) knew he could not rely on his vassal princes in Syria to gather an army sufficiently robust to challenge an Egyptian main force. He decided to take his own field army into Syria and resolve the issue at the strategic level.

Ramses II had underestimated his foe. His attempt to take on the Hittite forces under Muwatalli resulted in a near-disaster, the Battle of Qadesh (?1274 BC). Qadesh, 100 kilometres north of Damascus, was part of a kingdom (Amqi) which had oscillated between Hittites and Egyptians. It now became the fortified base for the Hittite-led resistance to Egypt's ambitions. Ramses II, advancing north via the Beqa'a, allowed his forces to become strung out and was intercepted by Muwatalli's army. In a battle magnificently dramatised on several of his monuments, Ramses only barely managed to rally his forces and lead his army back south. The Hittite army pursued the Egyptians into the territory of Upi and penetrated as far as Damascus. The Damascus region was initially placed under a Hittite governor (Hattusili, the King's brother) who later seized the Hittite throne. The Hittite presence in southern Syria, however, may have been intermittent and may have been challenged by Egyptian forces during the rest of the century.

On the whole, however, Egyptian interest in the area was relatively benign. The local kings ruled as long as they continued to pay annual tribute to Egypt, though we have no idea of the level of the tribute required of them. In return, Egypt maintained a security presence and benefited from taxes on trade. In the Damascus region, Egyptian interests were supervised by an Egyptian governor in residence. Hattusili concluded a peace treaty with Ramses (1259 BC) confirming the traditional Egyptian control over Damascus, to judge by the arrangements subsequently discussed in diplomatic correspondence for the marriage of Hattusili's daughter to the pharaoh and her transport through the territory of Upi (1246 BC).¹⁸

An intriguing new light has been thrown on this period by a stele recently discovered by the Syrian authorities. Dated to the 56th year of Ramses II's reign (?1223 BC), it was found reused in a Roman tomb at Kiswe, 25 kilometres south of Damascus. The stele illustrates Egypt's policy of seeking to incorporate the region into its world-view: the pharaoh is depicted honouring the local manifestations of Re, the Sun god, and his offspring, Seth, assimilated to the local god of storms (a role later assumed by Hadad, the major deity honoured in the next millennium at Damascus). The Egyptians increasingly valued the city's potential as a crossroads of international trade including such essential items as timber and industrial goods, as well as its forward defensive role. An Egyptian political presence in the Damascus area, symbolised by the pharaoh's accommodating gestures to the local gods, complemented the Egyptian strongpoints at Megiddo and Beth Shan in Palestine.¹⁹

A wider catastrophe

This balance was soon overturned, however, by events that rolled across the Levant with the arrival of the Sea Peoples around 1200 BC. The Sea Peoples' 'invasion' has long been taken as a convenient bookmark for the end of the Bronze Age and the opening of the Iron Age in the Middle East. We know of the mysterious Sea Peoples' existence from two Egyptian inscriptions, the most dramatic being the great hieroglyphic panels adorning the temple complex of Ramses III at Medinet Habu in Upper Egypt. Here Ramses grandiloquently celebrated his triumph in 1176 BC in turning back the tide which had already laid waste much of the Levant: 'They made a conspiracy in their islands. All at once the lands were on the move, scattered in war. No country could stand before their arms'.²⁰ Traces of destruction around this time have been found at many sites. Many other towns were abandoned or later reoccupied by people of a different culture.

The traditional explanation for Ramses III's dramatic inscription envisaged a swarm of invaders arriving from an island region to the north over a course of 50 years, bringing to an end much of the culture of the late Bronze Age from Anatolia to Libya. Nowadays, the picture of an invading horde or a 'domino effect' of population movement is less popular.²¹ The detailed evidence from a range of sites indicates a series of migrations caused perhaps by some initial invading presence but coinciding with widespread internal disruption in the Levant, possibly exacerbated by the break-up of the Hittite central power, the collapse of the old urban centres, by new developments in warfare and internal factors including climate variations and drought. The fact that many sites were simply abandoned indicates that an invading army was not the prime element in this picture. There is no doubt that a decline of state (i.e. palace) authority and of settled agriculture opened the way to a new influx of agro-pastoralists, perhaps the main manifestation of the cascading population movements that were the main product, not necessarily the cause, of the changes to the Levantine map. In the general confusion new population groups already infiltrating into the Fertile Crescent suddenly found their openings.²²

Damascus was only a peripheral part of this picture and we have no direct evidence as to how profoundly the settlement was affected by prolonged disruption. Though its trade flow would have suffered, it would have escaped physical disruption, sheltering from the coast behind its double barrier of steep mountain ranges. The wave of destruction affected most directly the coastal cities such as Ugarit, while many inland centres did not experience any violent change but absorbed developments peacefully.²³ As Damascus had not been a major Bronze Age centre, it was less vulnerable and shared many of the characteristics of other smaller settlements that became bases for the new population groups. Certainly, by the time the new Iron Age dawned, Damascus was to take on a profoundly more ambitious role on the Middle Eastern stage, typical of the new or revitalised centres which were to emerge with the transition from Bronze to Iron Age.

Notes

- 1 The major exception is the Danish exploration of Hama, final reports on which were not published until the 1950s to 1980s.
- 2 The limited evidence from Tell 'Aswad, Tell Ghoreife (both on the eastern edges of the outer Ghouta) and Tell Ramad (15 kilometres south-west, see Figure 1.2) is summarised in Pitard 1987: 20–24. For a recent comprehensive survey of the early archaeology of Syria, see Akkermans and Schwartz 2003 (especially 46–47, 109 on the Damascus region).
- 3 Pitard 1987: 25; van Lière 1963: 116–117.
- 4 Von der Osten 1956. Tell al-Salihiye's profile was so prominent that it led an English explorer, Rogers, to believe that its core must have been a 'solid mass of brickwork' enclosing a chamber along the lines of the pyramids of Egypt. Rogers 1869: 44.
- 5 The first reliable clues as to the possibility of Bronze Age settlement in Damascus have come from the excavations in the Damascus Citadel by a Franco-Syrian team – Maqdissi 2008–09.
- 6 Klengel 1985: 50; Pitard 1987: 25; van Lière 1963: 116; von der Osten 1956: 84. A first report on French-Syrian investigations at three tell sites along the 'Awaj River was interrupted after four seasons but a preliminary report is given in Cluzan and Taraqji 2011.
- 7 Thoumin 1936: 61–62.
- 8 Sauvaget 1934: 427.
- 9 Elisséeff 'Barada' in *EI2*. See also Thoumin 1936: 239.
- 10 Pitard 1987: 10.
- 11 Bryce 2012: 741–742; Pitard 1987: 10–11, 56.
- 12 Liverani 2006: 12 notes a number of such Egyptian 'residencies' in Syria at this time – Tell Afeq, Beth-Shan, Tell al-Far'a as well as more examples to the south.
- 13 Taraqji 1999. Klengel 1992: 99 notes the Egyptian practice of appointing royal representatives to coordinate Egyptian interests at Syrian courts.
- 14 Pitard 1987: 37–38. Tell Habiye, on the north bank of the 'Awaj, 20 kilometres south-west of Damascus, may have been another trading centre of note.
- 15 Akkermans and Schwartz 2003: 327.
- 16 Pitard 1987: 7, 54. The place name appeared in several different versions in the Karnak and Amarna records.
- 17 Klengel 1985: 51; Moran 1992 – texts *EA* 53, 107, 197. A local ruler or military leader mentioned in the Amarna Letters, Biriawaza, sought to extend his sway as far as the Beqa'a and Hazor though Pitard notes that it is not certain that Damascus was his capital – Pitard 1987: 69.
- 18 Pitard gives credibility to Damascus as the location of the Egyptian governor supervising the arrangements – Pitard 1987: 78 n.112.

- 19 Kitchen has speculated that the stele may have been erected to mark the meeting of an Egyptian and Hittite goodwill mission on the occasion of the renewal of the Egyptian–Hittite peace treaty. The Damascus environs were chosen so that both sides could affirm their oaths in the nearest major shrine, the Temple of Baal–Hadad in Damascus – Kitchen 1999. The stele is now in the National Museum in Damascus
- 20 Kuhrt 1995 II: 387.
- 21 A survey of the debate on the issues can be found in Cline 2014 with references to earlier commentary, notably by Mario Liverani who proposed a ‘collapse of Near Eastern civilisation at the end of the Bronze Age’ due mainly to the ending of ‘political and juridical guarantees covering inter-regional traffic’ (Liverani 1987: 69–70). Liverani 2006: 32–51 gives a comprehensive picture.
- 22 Klengel in Bunnens 2001: 23; Sader in Bunnens 2001: 63. On the climate factor, Liverani 2006: 34.
- 23 Hama’s experience was similar – Fugmann 1958: 274.

2

DIMASHQU

Damascus from the Aramaeans to the Assyrians (1100–732 BC)

After the turmoil

Damascus first emerged as a power on the international scene at the beginning of the first millennium BC. As a result of the two centuries of immense change and disruption in the Middle East, the centralised Hittite Empire based on Anatolia had gone and Egypt was focused on recovery at home. The fragmentation of political structures in northern Syria saw several small kingdoms emerge to control much of the countryside. These local principalities only loosely reflected the Hittite heritage they sought to emulate. The largest of the kingdoms included Hamath (Hama) and Carchemish (on the Euphrates, just as it crosses from Turkey into Syria). In parallel with the waning of the power of Egypt, the great empires to the east either, like Babylon, foundered entirely or, like Assyria, were for the moment confined to limited territory by the disruption provoked by the population movements.

An Aramaean Empire (eleventh century–733 BC)

In southern Syria, the most successful of the new groups that profited from this change were the Phoenicians along the coast and the Aramaeans inland. The latter were Semitic pastoralists who had gradually migrated over many centuries via the Jebel Bishri mountains of north-east Syria through a process of infiltration and absorption rather than invasion. A remarkable people, their achievements have largely been unsung, probably because we know so little of their history that they have been of interest only to specialists. Over a span of 300 years they absorbed the culture and institutions of older city-states as they consolidated their presence in northern Syria. Some Aramaeans were inducted into the Assyrian ruling classes that had implanted themselves in many areas,¹ but others may have had a role in blocking the Middle Assyrian kingdom, which in the eleventh century was

attempting to recover its western territories lost in the twelfth century BC. As they got closer to the Levant coast, this pastoral people, who apparently had no major cities of their own, moved their animals onto unoccupied grazing land and continued to infiltrate existing societies. This process, facilitated by the crumbling of the old imperial structures after 1200 BC, cleared the way for the Aramaeans' gradual seizure of political control.²

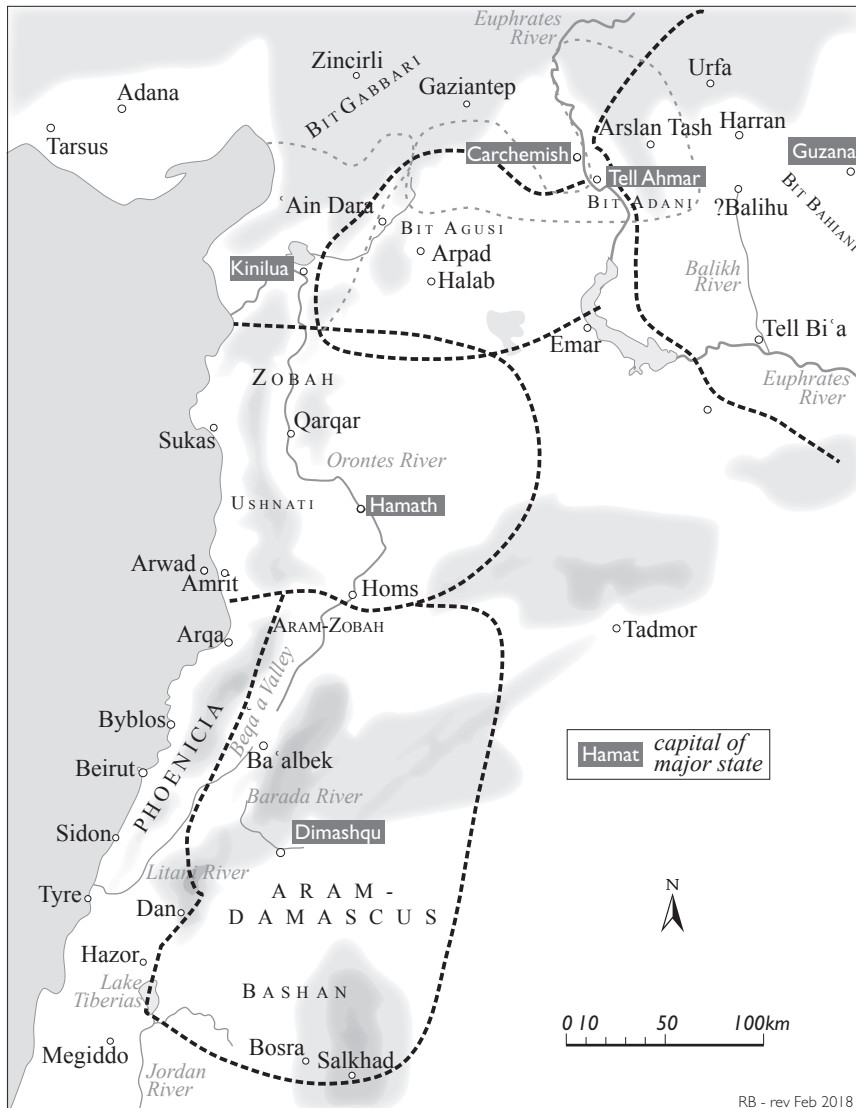


FIGURE 2.1 Aram-Damascus and the Aramaean states

By the beginning of the first millennium, the new Aramaean elites had abandoned nomadism and formed several federated tribal kingdoms that re-created much of the palace culture of the Syrian Bronze Age. The southernmost was Aram-Zobah, based on the Anti-Lebanon range and the northern Beqa'a. Its influence even reached the Euphrates through the control of commerce between Mesopotamia and the Palestinian coast, as well as traffic along the north-south route, the fabled King's Highway. Aram-Zobah, under King Hadadezer, provided the first challenge to the increasing power of another new kingdom, Israel, which had come into being, perhaps by a similar process of absorption of a pastoral population into existing town-based societies. If we can go by the Old Testament accounts, under King David (early to mid-tenth century BC), the tribes of Israel entertained new territorial ambitions. After 1000 BC, Aram and Israel were determinedly expansionist states destined to clash.³

Aram-Damascus vs Israel

When the Aramaeans first reached Damascus by the end of the eleventh century BC they adopted the existing place name into their tongue as 'Dimashqu' or 'Darmeseq'. Their presence was a peaceful one, quietly building a livelihood among the existing people of the oasis. The Aramaeans were apparently quick to spot the agricultural potential of an oasis that was still sparsely settled and underdeveloped. Initially, Damascus was merely an outpost of Aram-Zobah, a loose federation of Aramaean tribes possibly based at the northern end of the Beqa'a Valley. A family dispute in the ruling house of Aram-Zobah probably prompted the rapid rise of Damascus to pre-eminence in southern Syria. The disappointed claimant to the throne, Ezron, fled Zobah's capital and took Damascus by force around 965 BC during the reign of Solomon.⁴ Ezron usurped the throne from the former tribal leader of Damascus and set up an independent entity.

Aram-Damascus quickly spread its reach beyond the oasis into southern Syria and became a bulwark against Israel's ambitions in the Fertile Crescent. Part of the motivation may have been commercial, hence the Old Testament's emphasis on Solomon's old dream of establishing direct trade links to the east. This trading hegemony, however, would remain with Damascus. After 931 BC, the split between Judah and Israel played into the hands of Damascus. Under Ezron's grandson, Bir Hadad I (r.c.880–841 BC), and his successor, Hazael (842–c.800 BC), Damascus went on the offensive against Israel (described in the next section in the context of the conflicts with Assyria). The intense struggle between Israel and Aram-Damascus continued under the second Bir Hadad (early eighth century) who suffered the humiliation of being taken prisoner in Israel after two unsuccessful sieges of Samaria. He was forced to grant Israel special trading rights in Damascus.⁵ The terms on the whole were mild, perhaps in recognition that Israel and Damascus had a common interest in resisting the new threat, Assyria.

Neo-Assyrian Empire (964–c.800 BC)

The resurgent Assyrians revived their memories of the glory of the earlier Assyrian Empire of the second millennium. The 'Neo-Assyrian Empire', a relatively compact kingdom centred on Nineveh and the middle reaches of the Tigris, fostered the dream of reaching the Mediterranean, a goal previously blocked by the Hittite Empire. It had subsequently been foiled by the chaos of the twelfth century and the Aramaeans' swarming in via the south and south-west.

Now that urge towards the Mediterranean was revived. The Assyrians had already struck into Syria. As early as Adad-Nirari II (911–891 BC), they had taken the Khabur region going on to 'wash their weapons in the Great Sea'.⁶ They returned under Assurnasipal II (r.883–859 BC). The Neo-Hittite states of the north recognised their suzerainty but in southern Syria they were checked by an alliance of the forces of Damascus and Hamath. They tried again under Shalmaneser III (r.859–824 BC), Damascus serving as the unifying force in a coalition of 12 kingdoms, city states and desert princes. In 853 BC, at the Battle of Qarqar on the Orontes (a little south of modern Jisr al-Shugur), the grand coalition under the brilliant leadership of King Hadadezer of Damascus (now supported by King Ahab of Israel and the leading Aramaean states such as Hamath) could reputedly field a spectacular force comprising, in biblical sources, 3,900 chariots, 1,200 cavalry and 30,000 infantry.⁷

Though the Aramaeans managed to block further Assyrian encroachment into southern Syria, it had been touch and go against such a formidable enemy and proved to be a temporary respite. The Assyrians' inroads were relentless. Damascus was isolated, the only Syrian state which had managed to avoid Assyrian occupation. The grand coalition with Israel and Hamath fell apart with the death of Hadadezer of Damascus, smothered with a wet blanket by his usurping successor, Hazael. Hazael's initial campaigns into Israel were interrupted when the Assyrians in 841 BC suddenly appeared on the heights of Zabadani west of the city. The Aramaeans under Hazael retreated to what by then must have been the walled city of Damascus.⁸ The Assyrians took out their frustration at being unable to enter the city by plundering much of the environs, cutting down the oasis' orchards. The invaders went on to the Hauran and the coast, pausing long enough on their way home to erect a stele, still surviving on the cliff-face at the Dog River (Lebanon), proclaiming Assyrian supremacy.

Shalmaneser III returned in 838–837 BC for another inconclusive campaign but there followed a 30-year break in which the Assyrians, from 824 under Shalmaneser's successor Shamsi-Adad V, concentrated on northern Syria while Hazael turned his attention towards Israel. Possibly of Arab extraction, Hazael proved to be a brilliant warrior who pursued a strategy of outflanking Israel by seizing parts of Palestine including the coastal plain.⁹ He controlled the caravan route from Arabia that reached the sea along the Philistine coast. He spread his kingdom's fame far and wide¹⁰ and Kraeling believes he was on the verge of realising 'a Syrian–Arabian Empire when death called him from the throne'.¹¹

Subsequent rulers suffered temporary setbacks in efforts to block the Assyrians. In 803 BC Hazael's son and successor, Bir Hadad II, after defeat at the hands of the Assyrian Adad Nirari III was obliged to receive the Assyrian ruler in his palace and hand over a tribute that Assyrian records assessed at: 2,300 talents of silver, 20 of gold, 3,000 of copper, 5,000 of iron, cloths of many colours, linen, gold plate encrusted with precious jewels as well as stools and beds in ivory. These details we have from an inscription found at the site of Nimrud (Iraq), texts associated with ivories included in the tribute. A French archaeological excavation at Arslan Tash (ancient Hadatu) near the Syrian–Turkish border in 1928 unearthed among other treasures a rich lode of ivory panels in a Phoenician–Egyptian style from a palace that had been set up by the local Assyrian administrator in a provincial capital, Hadatu. The new capital had evidently been allocated part of the Damascus tribute. The hundred or more panels, now in the Aleppo Museum and the Louvre, were found next to the remains of a wooden bed reduced to a powdered outline by the decay of centuries. The ivories are all that we have to remind us of the splendours of the Aramaean palace.¹²

Damascus, however, again managed to shrug off Assyrian hegemony and survive on its wits as an independent state, profiting from the temporary decline in Assyrian power into the next century. It seems around this period to have quietly absorbed its 16 satellite kingdoms by converting them into provinces of Damascus. For the first time, Damascus in its own right had become an international city, a metropolis: 'the city of my joy' of Jeremiah 49.25.

Along the Mediterranean coast corresponding to present day Lebanon the Phoenicians, heirs to the old Canaanite tradition, had managed to maintain the independence of their trading entrepôts and block Aramaean infiltration. In the face of increasing Assyrian power, they had made themselves essential through their impressive capacity to supply the whole of the Fertile Crescent with what would be called today highly value-added products including textiles and that ivory-inlaid furniture which demonstrated the strong artistic influence of Phoenicia on the Damascus court. In later centuries, the Phoenicians sustained their trading reputation, took advantage of the new empires which required their costly exports and settled many of the ports along the shores of the western Mediterranean.

The city of the god

Trading and courtly links between the Phoenician city of Tyre and Israel were part of a wide range of contacts between Israel and the southern Phoenician cities. By the mid-ninth century BC, however, the eclectic culture of Aram–Damascus had replaced Phoenicia in Israel's mind as the dominant local civilisation. The rapid rise of Damascus is a good case study in the fluidity of the Middle East during this period of transition between nomadic tribal states and the revival of city-states. After centuries of decline, the cities were again the base of political power and the Aramaeans gave high priority to the establishment of new centres or refounding existing ones on a grand imperial scale. To the Aramaeans, a city was not just an

economic agglomeration but the physical home of a protective god who looked after the interests of the dominant tribal group enshrined in the hereditary monarchy. By the ninth century Damascus began to gain wider recognition as the city-state ruled by the local storm deity incorporated into the Aramaeans' pantheon as Hadad-Ramman. The city's influence even spread into professedly monotheistic Israel. A sanctuary honouring the Damascene cult has been found near Megiddo and a stele recently discovered at Bethsaida just inland from the north-eastern shore of Lake Tiberias seems to honour Hadad.¹³ There is also a curious (and probably apocryphal) passage in the first book of Kings (19.15–16) recording that Yahweh commanded the future prophet Elijah to go to Damascus and anoint Hazael as King of Aram-Damascus. This was commemorated in a synagogue built many centuries later in Jobar, two kilometres north-east of the old walls of Damascus. The site was marked by a column capital later revered, at least in one version, as the seat on which Elijah sat in anointing the king.¹⁴

Damascus in Aramaean times

Except for a fragment mentioned below, our knowledge of Damascus at this time is based largely on records left by other kingdoms, notably Israel, and thus inherently unfriendly. We have already noted that the Aramaeans were the first to undertake significant works to improve the productivity of the surrounding oasis. Their sophisticated political organisation identified the need for hydraulic works to channel the waters more productively and provided the infrastructure to coordinate the input of labour and regulate the division of the flow. We can still trace the first of the canals feeding off the Barada attributed to their skills.

The Barada River spreads out across the Ghouta along seven arms. Most are artificial canals feeding off the river. They tap the last few kilometres of the stream's course before it emerges from the Rabwe Gorge. No group seems to have had the capacity to construct such sophisticated irrigation works until the arrival of the Aramaeans. The first canal is a remarkable piece of engineering considering its age. The Tora Canal begins two kilometres upstream from the Rabwe Gorge, diverting left off the main stream and rounding the gorge along a trench cut into the rock, 0.75 metres wide and 1.5 metres deep. This trench diverted over half of the river's flow. From there, without descending to the level of the plain, it was diverted across the higher reaches of what are now the Malki and Jisr al-Abiad quarters, skirting below the site of the later medieval Arab suburb of Salihiye and the lower slopes of Mount Kassyun. From this elevation (720 metres, 30 metres above the mean level of the plain) it supplied the northern flood plain of the Barada, thus allowing intensive irrigation all year round. This had the effect of eliminating the summer drought and meant that the oasis could be irrigated on a large scale without resort to manual or animal-drawn means of raising water. Until these improvements, the Barada fed into marshy lowlands, submerged for part of the year by the spring flood. By diverting a major part of the river's flow before it reached the plain, the over-abundance of water at lower levels was corrected and diverted to good use.

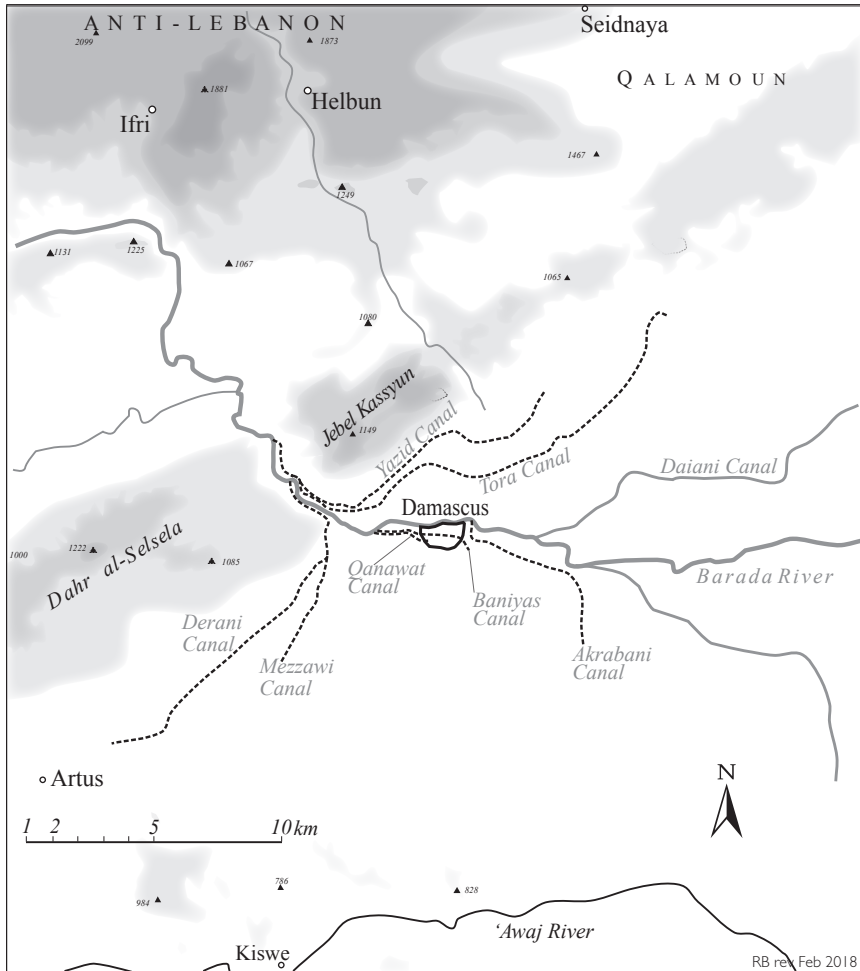


FIGURE 2.2 Arms of the Barada

Damascus, until now perhaps just one among many villages in the Ghouta and suffering from the additional disadvantage of a location too close to the river's flood, was freed of its belt of inhospitable marshes to become the market centre for the oasis and its surrounding nomadic population.

The Aramaeans' ingenuity is still credited to them by the survival of the name they gave to the original canal. Tora is of Aramaean origin and Sauvaget attributes to the Aramaeans' Mesopotamian experience of water control this brilliant project to extend the productivity of the Ghouta oasis.¹⁵ Many nearby villages (today largely swallowed by the suburbs of Damascus) bear names that indicate new Aramaean settlements: Duma, Harasta, Deraya, Kafr Batna, Aqraba.¹⁶ 'Di-mash-qu' (the Aramaeans' adopted version of the name), with the rise of its own dynasty, now

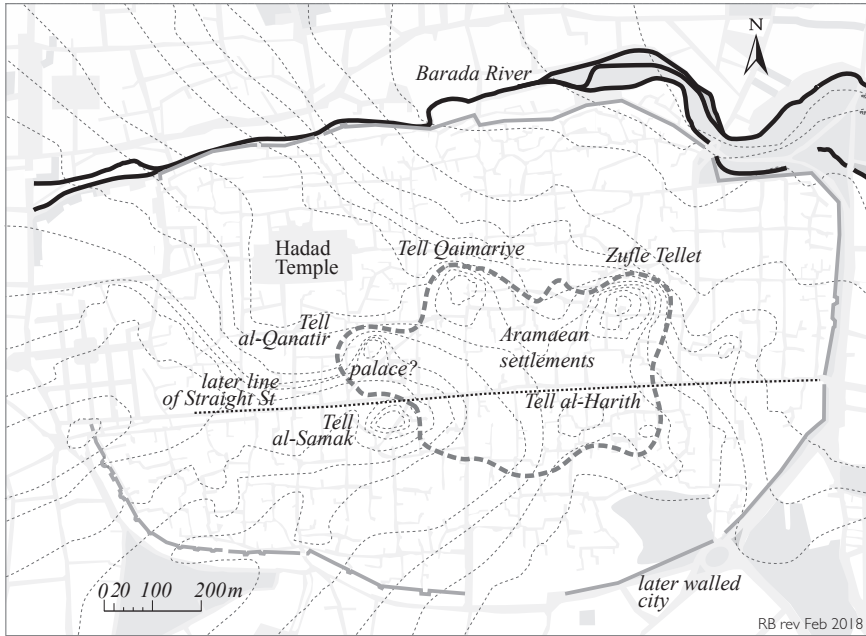


FIGURE 2.3 Aramaean Damascus

became a political centre of note.¹⁷ It is certainly significant that just at this time, in the opinion of its German excavator, Tell Salahiye markedly declined in status, presumably because Damascus had overtaken it as the major centre of the oasis.¹⁸

The ten metre high ridge south of the Barada made sense as the obvious point on which to build without tying up valuable agricultural land. The Aramaeans appear to have decided to consolidate the existing hamlets along the ridge as their capital. We can only surmise where on the ridge the original new dynastic capital was located. At four points in the topography of the present-day walled city, you come across rises in the land surface, no more than two to five metres above the mean. Some may be based on natural outcrops but at least two reflect accumulated debris from occupation layers that predated the classical period remains across the city. The usual method of construction in ancient times (as indeed in most of Syria's villages until the arrival of modern concrete building methods) was earth beaten to form floors and dried mud-bricks for the walls. The roof and larger walls were of earth held between frameworks of local timber. The materials were fragile and as they crumbled or were eroded by rain the residue accumulated, forming the successive levels of the mound or *tell* on which the town gradually rose.

The most significant of these mounds, Tell al-Samak (immediately south of Straight Street, the main cross-city thoroughfare, a little west of its mid-point) was identified by scholars in the first half of the twentieth century as the mound of a pre-Aramaean settlement. More recent deductions now prefer to see this rise as the

result of the collapse and demolition of a Roman odeon on this spot. (At the Arab conquest, this area was called 'al-Baris', an Aramaean term passed into Greek indicating the presence of a palace.) A mound north of Straight Street, Tell al-Qanatir (immediately east of the spices *sūq* which heads north from Straight Street towards the south wall of the Umayyad Mosque) would serve better as the site of the Aramaean palace, particularly as it is near the area we later know to have housed successive rulers' residences through to the Mamluk period and later the palace of the eighteenth-century Ottoman governor, As'ad Pasha al-'Azem.

The temple

We have seen that the main god of the city was the Semitic storm god, Hadad-Ramman.¹⁹ As god of thunderstorms and rain, often worshipped on high places, Hadad determined the fecundity of the earth. (His consort was the Syrian fertility goddess Atargatis who was later to enjoy her own long tradition.) The cult was widespread in western Syria and had a particular association with crops where rainfall was critical to success, notably wine. A prestigious site was needed to honour the city's god. Three hundred metres north of the palace, the terrain flattens out a little giving a spacious area commanding the whole ridge and surrounding countryside. This sacred zone, today occupied by the Umayyad Mosque, was probably the site of the temple to the god who assured the Aramaean dynasty's fortunes. The worship of Hadad-Ramman was the very basis of the kings' legitimacy; each ruler's throne name incorporating part of the deity's title. The sacred area began to be developed on a scale to match the growing international prestige of the dynasty.

We have no direct knowledge of what the temple of Hadad-Ramman looked like. It probably followed the traditional form, comparable in plan to other Semitic-Canaanite examples like the 'Ain Dara or Tell Afis temples.²⁰ The enclosure comprised a walled courtyard to one side of which stood a relatively small chamber in which the most sacred of the cult practices were performed. Some form of tower or elevated platform would also reflect Semitic usage and symbolised the 'high place' of the storm god cults. Only one stone from the Aramaean temple survives in recognisable form: a bas-relief of a winged animal with the head of a man draped in an Egyptian-style headdress. The stone was found reused in the northern wall of the Umayyad Mosque and is now in the Damascus National Museum. Its style, dated to the reign of King Hazael, indicates Phoenician influence, characteristic of the Aramaean states' capacity to absorb outside trends.²¹ It is possible to imagine it serving as an orthostat or stone panel to line the wall at a focal point of the Aramaean temple's entrance, much along the same lines as the protective animal orthostats in contemporary temples in northern Syria.²²

We currently have no way of knowing how extensive the Aramaean city might have been. Presumably, in amalgamating the earlier hamlets on the ridge, the Aramaeans simply joined them in a haphazard arrangement rather than embraced them in a re-planned layout. It seems likely, however, that the straggling line of the ridge track that joined the hamlets survived to become the spine that united



FIGURE 2.4 Basalt orthostat depicting a sphinx, from the Aramaean Temple

Source: 'Abd al-Kader 1949: pl. VIII

the new grouping, the seminal form of the future Straight Street, still the sole thoroughfare across the city.

There are economic factors, too, which explain why the Aramaean period marks the evolution of Damascus from village to capital. Until the first millennium, Damascus was probably not an obligatory stop on any major international trade route. Though the Egyptians intermittently may have used the Damascus oasis as a point for coordinating the supply of goods from further north, Damascus' potential as an outlet for the cross-desert trade was unrealised. One difficulty was the lack of an obvious route from Damascus to the coast. While there were several options – the routes to Tripoli in northern Lebanon, Tyre and Sidon in the south or Accho (Acre) on the southern Phoenician coast – it was difficult to say which

was the stand-alone choice. Tyre may have been the most accessible as the others involved either challenging mountain paths or a long diversion to the north to avoid the two mountain ranges. To make a stop in Damascus worthwhile, therefore, it had to offer some distinct advantage to boost its entrepôt role. The breakthrough was now at hand: the camel.

The domestication of the camel around the turn of the first millennium BC revolutionised cross-desert trade, making the direct transit of the desert a possibility. Once the opening of trade routes to Arabia provided a plentiful source of camels, Damascus became a natural transit point for the cross-desert routes from both Mesopotamia and Arabia.²³ Goods that previously had to use the northern Syrian route to skirt the wilderness could now reach new markets previously denied them. The bulk loads transported by camels were broken down into smaller consignments and carried by donkey to the Phoenician ports of Tyre and Sidon.²⁴

The economy of Damascus now took off. Not only was it the city on the desert edge best placed to serve as an entrepôt, it had developed its own industries due to the energy and organisational skills of its Aramaean overlords. It already had a formidable reputation in metalworking – useful both for arms and the production of chariots. It developed its wool industry to a high order, including the dyeing and weaving of elaborate designs. Its investment in irrigation quickly paid off. Finally, it boasted a cult centre of considerable note, always a useful means of maximising a city's drawing power – a centre, moreover, which was to rival the status of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem in attracting support from its hinterland.

The kingdom's influence was also reflected in the spread of its language, the Damascene version of Western Aramaic. So effective was the penetration of the Aramaeans, particularly in commerce, that their language became the *lingua franca* of a wider area. A 'simplicity of structure coupled with an easy and convenient script' (adapted from Phoenician) aided its spread.²⁵ By the eighth century BC, it was the language of diplomacy for the region. So deeply ingrained did it become that it survived all the invasions of the next few centuries, nudging aside even the languages of future conquerors such as the Assyrians, Babylonians or Persians to remain the main language of international correspondence. More remarkable still was its survival even through the period of powerful Greek, Roman and Arabic influence when it remained a language of more than local significance. Aramaic was the language of common communication in the Judean hills at the time of Christ and the tongue which he spoke to reach a mass audience. Syriac Christians adopted it as their liturgical language and took it into northeastern Syria and Iraq where remnants can even now be found of communities speaking a version of Aramaic. The remarkable spread and survival of this language is the first manifestation of the city's new international profile.²⁶

Under Hazael, for the first time, Damascus had acquired an empire. 'It is clear that for 60 years (c 845–785) Damascus was the dominant power in much of Syria–Palestine and Israel (as well as Judah) had to submit to the role of vassal kings'.²⁷ The city's political and economic standing brought diplomatic and trading links that spread its fame across much of western Asia. It was not to be an ephemeral

fame. The Middle Eastern countryside is today littered with dusty mounds that once supported major urban centres that flourished in good times but failed to find a permanent economic foothold. Di-mash-qu was now sufficiently endowed to avoid that fate thanks to the permanent improvements the Aramaeans had left.

Resurgent Assyria (eighth century BC)

Damascus' dominance of the Fertile Crescent, however, did not last much more than a century. Deprived of the wider alliance it had assembled in the mid-ninth century BC, it could not withstand the resurgent power of Assyria to the east and the levying of Damascus' tribute became a regular event. This time, Assyria was not to be thwarted.

During the years 835 to 805 BC, when the Assyrian threat had abated (see page 24), Damascus had gone on the offensive against Israel, lopping off large parts of its territory east of the Jordan. As the Assyrian threat drew closer, Israel began the dangerous game of seeking in Assyria a counter to Aramaean dominance. Adad-Nirari III of Assyria (r.810–782 BC), the 'saviour' hailed by the kingdom of Israel, proved to be nothing of the kind. In reality he was a new and more ruthless oppressor. After 770 BC, Israel occupied parts of Damascene territory, leaving Damascus severely weakened. However, both states were so reduced in power that, disunited, they could easily be picked off by the renewed threat from the east.

The threat intensified suddenly under Tiglath-Pilaser III (r.745–727 BC) who gave the Assyrian state a new dynamism and a professional army; a capacity to sustain foreign operations for more than the usual seasonal campaign and to conquer territory previously held in tribute. Assyria now proved unstoppable in pursuing its dream of expanding its empire into the southern reaches of the Levant. After breaking the power of the kingdoms of Arpad and Hamath in northern Syria, Tiglath-Pilaser set his sights on Damascus. The king of Damascus, Rasyan (c.740–732 BC), had tried (too late) to bring both the royal houses of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah into an alliance to oppose Assyria. Pekah of Israel cooperated but Ahaz of Judah did not. Preemptively, Damascus and Israel joined forces to capture Jerusalem but Ahaz opted to turn to Tiglath-Pilaser for help – 'Come and rescue me from the King of Aram and the King of Israel who are making war on me' – thus opening the door to Assyrian conquest.²⁸

In 733 BC, Tiglath-Pilaser eagerly acceded to Ahaz's request. He first struck towards the Phoenician coast to isolate Damascus from Israel then doubled back to the east. King Rasyan took refuge 'like a caged bird' in Damascus,²⁹ still walled with mud brick defences, while the Ghouta villages were ravaged during the prolonged siege. It was the next year (732) before the city fell. Tiglath-Pilaser personally arranged the king's slaughter. But that was not all; the Assyrians wanted definitively to erase the Aramaean state. Rasyan's advisers were impaled and the 591 towns of the 16 Aramaean principalities, according to the Assyrian archives, were 'destroyed like mounds left by a flood'. The vast 'house of Hazael' was annexed. Nothing

remained but for Tiglath-Pilaser to punish the city for its long resistance by banishing much of the population to Assyria, the first of the great deportations recorded in the Old Testament.³⁰ For Damascus, its first 'dream of empire' was abruptly and effectively snuffed out.³¹

Epilogue: An altar for Jerusalem

Damascus remained, however, the chief city of Syria, even under Assyrian rule. A closing note which illustrates that the eclipse of Damascus as an imperial capital did not end the city's role as a vibrant cultural and religious centre is an incident which marked the transition from Aramaean to Assyrian rule in Damascus. Ahaz, king of Judah, regarded in the Old Testament as somewhat suspect for his attachment to the old faiths ('he offered sacrifices and incense on the high places, on the hills and under every luxuriant tree' – 2 Kings 16.4), had hurried up to Damascus to pay homage to the Assyrian conqueror he had invited to the region. Given his partiality to pantheistic Semitic customs, it is not surprising that Ahaz was so impressed by the altar of Beth Ramman in Damascus that he commanded it be copied in Jerusalem.

When King Ahaz [r.732–716 BC] went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pilaser King of Assyria, he saw the altar which was in Damascus. King Ahaz then sent a picture and model of the altar, with details of its construction, to Uriah the Priest. Uriah the Priest constructed the altar . . . When the King arrived from Damascus, he inspected the altar, he approached it and ascended it. And on the altar he made his burnt offering and his oblation, he poured out his libation and sprinkled the blood of his communion sacrifices.

2 Kings 16.10–13

Ahaz's obeisance may have quarantined his kingdom from Assyrian ambitions for the moment. The kingdom of Israel was conquered but the kingdom of Judah was spared the Assyrians' acquisitive urge for the moment, although suffering a nasty razzia under Sennacherib (r.721–705) which probably ruined much of the south. By 721 BC, the Assyrians had seized Samaria and deported the population to Assyria. The Old Testament is quick to apportion blame to the Israelites' toying with the old faiths.

They sacrificed on all the high places like the nations which Yahweh had expelled for them, and did wicked things there, provoking Yahweh's anger.

2 Kings 17.10–11

In any event, the Assyrian tide was soon to sweep all before it. Under Essarhaddon (680–669), Assyria extended its sovereignty as far as Egypt. Damascus had become a small speck on the spread of a vast empire reaching from Elam (modern south-western Iran) to Egypt and Anatolia.

Notes

- 1 Kuhrt 1995 II: 391–398; Sader in Bunnens 2001: 64.
- 2 The Aramaeans' steady infiltration set a pattern that was repeated in the next 2000 years by other Semitic groups. By the third century BC, the Nabataeans gradually took up sedentary occupation of parts of southern Jordan. Other Arab groups also set up footholds in Roman Syria that made the transition from Byzantine to Arab rule a less than traumatic process in many areas
- 3 The sources for this period are both rich and distorted. Rich in the sense that the Old Testament provides an incomparable body of material on the history of Israel and Judah but distorted in that it is not easy to distil the historical record from a huge store of legendary material until reliable archaeological data becomes available in the late ninth century. Moreover, we should not forget that the events of the Bible's narrative formed only a minor part of the Middle East scene. Mario Liverani's reconstruction of the history of the period reminds us: 'the fact is we cannot read the "Bibles" of Carchemish, Damascus, Tyre or Gaza' (Liverani 2006: xvi.)
The biblical record, for instance, has David containing Aram–Zobah from both north and south by establishing friendly relations with Hamath. In spite of the greater size of Aram's empire, if the Old Testament account is to be read literally, David may for a time have occupied parts of Aramaean territory after Damascus had joined an unsuccessful coalition which lost in battle against Israel at Hamath. ('David then imposed governors on Aram of Damascus and the Aramaeans became David's subjects and paid him tribute'—2 Samuel 8.6.) Solomon (ascribed to the period c.965–928 BC but, again, not corroborated outside the Old Testament) continued David's vigorous pursuit of territorial ambitions.
- 4 1 Kings 11.23–25; Klengel 1992: 208; Lipinsky 2000: 369 puts event around 950; Pitard 1987: 96–97; Sader in Bunnens 2001: 71.
- 5 There is some confusion in the fragmentary records as to how many Bir-Hadads held the Damascus throne and how they relate to the biblical record but it seems the rivalry with Israel lasted well into the eighth century BC.
- 6 Inscription quoted in Roaf 1990: 160.
- 7 Dion 1997:183; Klengel 1992: 209. Lipinski 2000: 376 gives higher numbers.
- 8 DeGeorge 1997: 45; Lipinski 2000: 350, 384.
- 9 Klengel 1992: 210; Finkelstein and Silberman 2002: 204; Lipinski 2000: 351 argues that the lands west of the Jordan only paid tribute to Hazael and were not annexed.
- 10 Lipinski 2000: 389 gives some details.
- 11 Kraeling 1918: 81–82.
- 12 Another curious memento of Hazael's reign, however, turned up in Samos in Greece. Amid the debris layer in a sixth century *heraion* was a bronze relief depicting four naked female figures forming part of a horse's forehead ornament referring to operations by Hazael 'across the river'. The relief must have been taken from a member of Hazael's forces on an expedition across the Euphrates as booty by a Greek mercenary in the Assyrian forces – Eph'al and Naveh 1989.
- 13 Lipinski 2000: 633.
- 14 Lewis 1940–42; Hanauer 1925: 31–34. See also page 250.
- 15 Sauvaget 1934: 435.
- 16 Taraqji 1999: 29.
- 17 Sauvaget 1934: 435.
- 18 Von der Osten 1956: 87.
- 19 Ramman ('the thunderer') was a cognomen for Hadad – see Zechariah 12.11, Lipinski 2000: 627. Hadad is indistinguishable from other Semitic storm gods such as Baal and shares a common representation, standing on a bull with a lightning bolt in the right hand – Lipinski 2000: 632.
- 20 Will 1994: 12. For 'Ain Dara–Abu 'Assaf 1990; Tell Afis–Mazzoni 2014.
- 21 The stone and its provenance are discussed in 'Abd al-Kader 1949. See also Pitard 1987: 4; Trokay 1986.

34 From the Aramaeans to the Assyrians

- 22 Less elegant examples of such panels survive in the archaeological museums of Aleppo, Berlin and Istanbul. There is virtually no other surviving example of the art of the Aramaeans of Damascus except a stele commissioned by Bir Hadad I found in northern Syria – see Albright 1942b: 23–29; Dunand 1939: 65–76.
- 23 Albright 1942a: 96; Bulliet 1990: 58, 80; Dion 1997: 366; Klengel in Bunnens 2001: 23; Retsö 1991: 208; Retsö 2003: 122–23, 127, 129; Lipinski 2000: 543.
- 24 Dentzer in Gaube and Fansa (eds) 2000: 98; Klengel 1979: 198–199; Klengel 1985: 50; Klengel in Bunnens 2001: 24.
- 25 Kraeling 1918: 139. See also Taylor 2001: 151.
- 26 Close to Damascus, in the folds of the Anti-Lebanon range, villages have retained an Aramaean identity in spite of the many later conquests Syria has experienced. The picturesque village of Maloula (50 kilometres north) has long used a form of Aramaic as its language of normal use. In the last 50 years it has finally succumbed to modern education and the language has died out as a domestic tradition.
- 27 Liverani 2006: 115.
- 28 2 Kings 16.7–8.
- 29 Kraeling 1918: 118.
- 30 Tadmor and Yamada 2011: 59 (text 20, lines 13–16).
- 31 Kraeling 1918: 120.

3

A GREATER GAME

Assyrians, Persians, Greeks (732–c.300 BC)

Assyrian rule (732–626 BC)

In the face of the Assyrian wave of conquest, the empire of Aram-Damascus was no more, its heartland now just another Assyrian province, one of the three created out of southern Syria and governed by Assyrian officials. A dark age descended on Damascus and not much is known of its fortunes under the Assyrian yoke. It certainly remained a centre for Aramaean resistance and a revolt in the city in 727 BC had to be put down by occupying forces. Its strategic economic location, however, meant that it could not be overlooked entirely. Unlike the other Aramaean capitals ‘it never lost its place at the heart of the economic, cultural and political life of the Near East’.¹ In many ways, Aramaean civilisation won over its Assyrian and later conquerors. Its influence in terms of the racial and cultural mix that it represented remained pervasive, a substratum on which the people of the next millennium of Near Eastern civilisation built.

The Assyrians, however, were certainly the political masters. Egypt was now the only threat to Assyrian supremacy. Tiglath-Pilaser had realised that control of Syria had to be secured by taming the Phoenician city-states of the coast (see Chapter 2), denying their use as bridgeheads for resurgent Egyptian influence while tapping the wealth that flowed through their ports. In 721–720 BC, a revolt against Assyria by several cities led by Hamath, still unconquered by Assyria, and encouraged by the Egyptians, had to be put down by Sargon II (Assyrian ruler 721–706 BC) on ascending the throne. The same year, Sargon proved his mettle by finally defeating a coalition of Aramaean forces that had, perhaps symbolically, again chosen the fortress of Qarqar as the focus of their resistance. The Assyrian leader this time clearly intended to end the last vestiges of Aramaean political identity and installed governors in those cities that had until then enjoyed some measure of self-rule. He went on to subjugate the remaining principalities of northern Syria and quell a further revolt in Damascus.

The Assyrian King Sennacherib (r.704–681 BC), having confirmed the subjugation of Syria, in 701 BC sought complete Assyrian supremacy over the local dynasties that still controlled the coastal areas of Phoenicia and Israel. He took Tyre and later Sidon on the Phoenician coast and deported their people to labour on public works in Nineveh. With a growing number of threats at home to the Assyrian regime, its reach as far as the Mediterranean coast soon faltered. The Phoenician cities managed, partly with Egyptian help, to regain a degree of

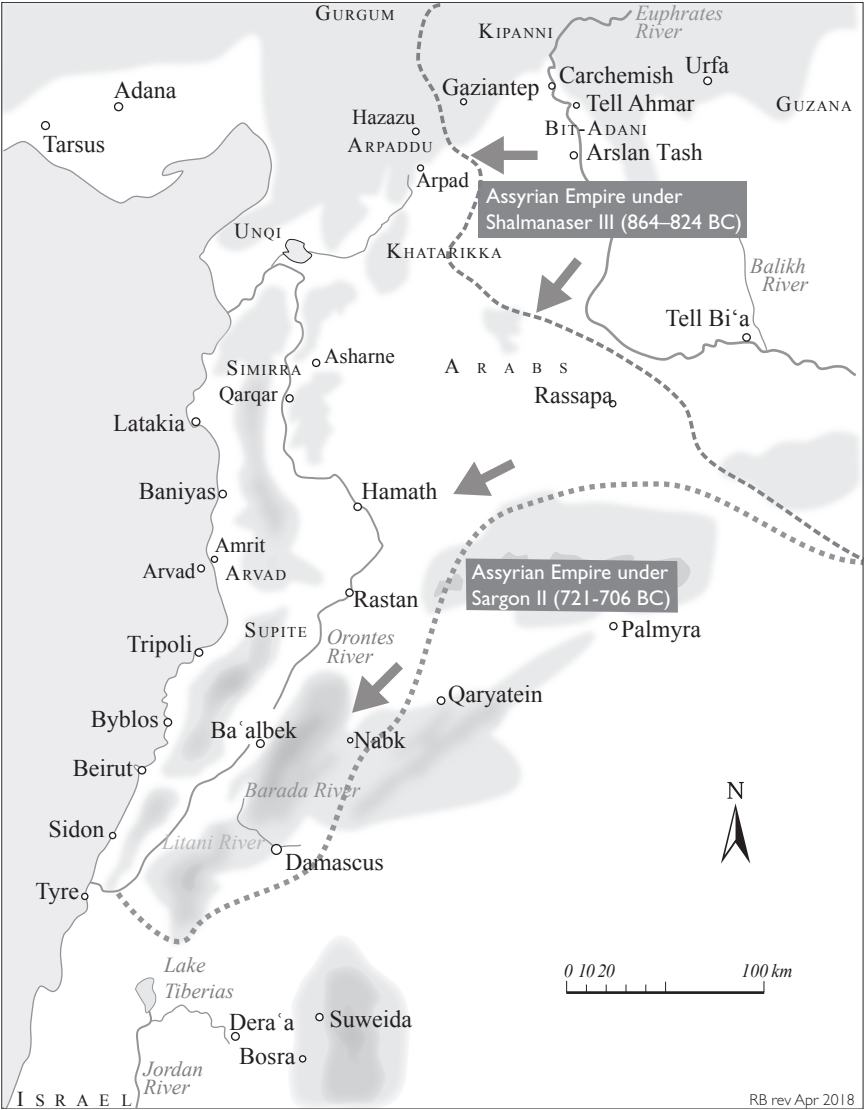


FIGURE 3.1 Assyrian and Persian rule

independence, unlike inland areas such as Damascus, which remained more fully subordinate to the Assyrians.²

The Assyrian Empire was based on the absolute power of the monarch. The aristocracy that had once served as a check on the ruler, reminding him that he was no more than *primus inter pares*, was gradually sidelined. It was a tough, no-nonsense regime but it had a sophisticated administrative apparatus and a developed infrastructure, including a system of roads equipped with way stations and a courier service. It was the first Middle Eastern power, apart from Egypt, which could sustain its grip over an extensive empire and administer it. International trade flourished, promoted by state intervention in the opening up and securing of new routes, an important and declared aim of the regime. Damascus benefited, particularly from the spices and incense trade from Arabia – always a highly profitable venture during periods of firm governance.

The Empire, though, faced many challenges. Politically its writ in Syria largely held, but the basically Aramaean substratum began to stage a comeback. While, in the mid-seventh century, Assyria was sufficiently confident to invade Egypt (671 BC), it was chased out after a series of revolts by Egyptian patriots. Shortly afterwards, constant rebellions closer to home weakened Assyrian authority. Generations of murderous and cruel rule had left the regime without friends and it began to implode. In Babylon, whose own tradition dated back to the later part of the second millennium, Chaldean leaders (representing a West Semitic tribal group which had come into southern Mesopotamia from the northwest beginning in the eleventh century) remained powerful, seizing the Babylon throne in 626. Damascus seems to have drifted off with the rest of southern Syria-Palestine around 609–605 BC to become for a while part of the realms of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty Pharaoh Necho II. It remained in the orbit of Egypt during the last stages of the Assyrian Empire when the Egyptians retained control as far as the Euphrates.

Neo-Babylonian (Chaldean) rule (626–539 BC)

The circumstances of Assyria's implosion, however, are not at all clear. We have glimpses of a process in which Assyrian rulers in Nineveh were gradually being edged out by the forces of Babylon, a kingdom traditionally allied to Assyria but increasingly ascendant in its own right in lower Mesopotamia. The Babylonians allied themselves with the Medes, another population wave from the north-east, probably ultimately Central Asia. In 612 BC, Nineveh fell to the Medes and the Babylonians but it took many years of fighting to eliminate entirely the last Assyrian forces. It was a Chaldean, Nabopolassar (r.626–609 BC), who having originally served as a general appointed by an Assyrian prince, took possession of the Babylonian throne in 626.³ He founded a dynasty known as the Neo-Babylonian (626–539 BC), initially an anti-Assyrian alliance that for a time included the Medes. The Neo-Babylonians gradually secured most of the remaining territory of the Assyrian Empire, with Nebuchadnezzar (r.605–562 BC) taking the last outpost at Carchemish from Egyptian hands in 605 BC.

It was not until the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II (r.604–562 BC), however, that Egyptian control in southern Syria was challenged by Babylon. In 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem (retaking it again after a revolt in 586 BC), bringing to an end the dynasty of David and forcing Judah and Israel to pay tribute. Resistance to Babylonian rule resulted in the major series of deportations to Babylon. By 572 BC, all Syria was in Babylonian hands. However, on the Phoenician coast and in Israel, cities retained nominal independence under local dynasties, with effective rule probably in the hands of Babylonian officials.

The Medes, whose kingdom occupied much of present-day Iran, were closely associated with the Achaemenid Persians who stemmed from the area of southern Iran bordering the Persian Gulf. In 559 BC, Cyrus II came to the Persian throne (r.559–530 BC) and led a rebellion against Median domination in 550 BC. Cyrus now found himself leader of a huge kingdom which reached to the Black Sea coast of Asia Minor. In 539 BC he also swallowed the Babylonian homeland, taking the capital unopposed.

Nothing specific is known of the situation in Damascus by the sixth century, perhaps not surprising since Damascus now lay in a small remote province ruled by a vast empire which had little interest in its far-flung provincial capitals. Liverani notes the decline in population in Syria-Palestine and ascribes the poverty of material culture to a situation where a remote capital saw no point in devolving power to local elites. ‘Without local elites commissioning architectural and artistic work . . . the residue of the population suffered a deep cultural decline’.⁴

Persian (Achaemenid) rule (539–333 BC)

The Persian Empire now embraced four former empires stretching from northern India to the Levant coast and Asia Minor, the first to entertain truly global aspirations. Building on the infrastructure left by the Assyrians, this first Persian Empire (dubbed ‘Achaemenid’ after the dominant dynasty) had a sophisticated standard of administration. Cyrus had a reputation as a benevolent ruler and governed distant provinces such as Syria with a light hand. The Jews who had been exiled to Babylon were sent back to their homeland in 538 BC and were authorised to begin construction of a Second Temple on a site destroyed by the Assyrians. In 525 BC, Cyrus’ son, Cambyses (529–522 BC), took Egypt, adopting the religious and political mantle of a pharaoh. Darius I (521–486 BC) reorganised the Empire, breaking up the old satrapy (governorship) of Mesopotamia and trans-Euphrates to form a new fifth satrapy. Xerxes (r.485–465 BC) achieved much in consolidating the Empire, stabilising the administration and discouraging further attempts at secession by outlying provinces. The Assyrian system of inter-provincial roads was retained and improved, later to be upgraded further under the Greeks and Romans.

At home, the King of Kings was guardian of the creation entrusted to him by the Persians’ supreme god, Ahuramazda. As shown in the superbly stylised relief panels on the Great Palace at Persepolis, the imperial ceremonial centre created

by the Achaemenids on a grand and geometric scale, the Empire exulted in the mixture of races it brought together, though the firm rule of one family gave a privileged position to the Persians. In the words of Herodotus:

After their own nation they hold their nearest neighbours most in honour, then the nearest but one – and so on, their respect decreasing as the distance grows, and the most remote being the most despised.⁵

The grand preoccupation of the Achaemenid kings, however, was to get the ‘most remote’ of those people, the Greek states, to recognise Persian supremacy. Some, such as Thebes and Thessaly, did join Persia but Sparta and Athens refused. Athens led a coalition of Greek forces that gradually gained supremacy in the Aegean and along the Ionian coast and even managed to threaten the Persian hold on the shores of the Levant, the events described in Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War* (covering the period 479 to 431 BC). By 400 BC, Persian control of Asia Minor had more or less been accepted by Athens, a situation that prevailed until Alexander’s campaign of 334 BC. The Achaemenids lost control in Egypt following a revolt in 401 BC and spent a number of decades trying to win back their influence. This made it all the more important that they maintain their hold over Syria-Palestine. The campaign by Artaxerxes III to regain Egypt in 343 BC was preceded in 345 BC by the crushing of a revolt by the Phoenician cities led by Sidon. Significantly, a force of Greek mercenaries despatched from Egypt had aided the Sidonians.

Artaxerxes died shortly afterwards in a family bloodbath. After further court intrigue leading to the murder of his immediate successor, Darius III came to the throne in 335 BC. Destined to be the opponent of Alexander the Great, Darius’ reputation as an effective ruler has been irretrievably but probably unjustly damaged by the bad press he received from the Greek historians.

Damascus during the twilight of the Ancient Near East

Damascus formed an integral part of the Achaemenid mega-empire. In Herodotus’ history, it is listed as part of the fifth Persian satrapy, the seat of the governor of ‘Abar Nahara’ (‘beyond the river’, i.e. the Euphrates) split off from the satrapy of Babylon. Cyprus and Palestine were included in the new division. Damascus had acquired a certain prestige in Persian eyes and was one of the centres selected for the promotion of the imperial cult of the god Anahita.⁶ An indicator of the relative status and wealth of the province is the level of tribute paid to the Persians which was fixed at 350 talents, though this was still relatively modest compared with Egypt or Assyria (700).

The governorate ruled from Damascus was a diverse entity. In spite of the iron rule of the Achaemenids in Persepolis, local autonomy often reflected indigenous traditions. Under Damascus, for example, the Phoenician cities still retained their traditional dynasts; the Jews of the sub-province of Jehud were under the authority

of their priesthood, while other regions such as Ammon, east of the Jordan, were ruled by local prefects appointed from Damascus.⁷ This was part of the reason for the enduring success of Achaemenid rule. It combined firm authority with local accountability and flexibility, probably the most successful example before the Romans' arrival 300 years later.

Once again it is difficult to obtain an impression of Damascus under the Achaemenids. Damascus' political status did not endow it with any buildings which have survived. It is possible that the Persian governor's palace lay in the quarter 'Maqsallat al-Baris' whose significance was noted on page 28.⁸ The only physical remains of the period's architecture are two Persian-style capitals found at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁹ It is reasonable to see the temple of Hadad, however, as the continued centrepiece of the city and it received a gift of a statue of Aphrodite Anaitis (the Greek version of the Persian Anahita), according to literary evidence. The temple's basic shape would have lent itself to embellishment along the lines of the temple which the Persians developed at Amrit (immediately south of the modern Syrian port city, Tartus).

This remarkable compound has been researched and partly reconstructed by French and Syrian experts. It has several features in common with the later form of the Damascus temple: a large open compound; a central chapel or *cella*; the use of flanking towers to emphasise the main axis. The decoration was essentially Mesopotamian in style, especially the stepped merlons that profile the towers and the arcades that surround the central open space.¹⁰ These are all features that



FIGURE 3.2 Amrit, temple of Melqart seen from the north

survive in the classical version of the Damascus temple. The major difference is that, at Amrit, the open space was almost entirely filled with a sacred lake with steps leading down to it from the north.

In these 150 years that marked the final stages of the Ancient Near East, Damascus remained largely sheltered from the wider Mediterranean world beyond the Lebanon range. Cambyses' conquest of Egypt was only briefly successful; the Theban kingdom paid merely nominal tribute to the Persians. The preoccupations of the Persian Empire remained in Asia Minor and the tussle over the relative spheres of influence of Greeks and Persians. Syria, whose trade routes connected the northern realm to the Gulf of Aqaba, remained a mixture of cities and tribes presided over by the Achaemenids.¹¹ For the last time for nearly a thousand years, the political and economic agenda was set from the east by the last great empire of the pre-classical world, an empire whose roots were still planted in the steppe-lands of Asia. That was now about to change in ways that would have profound consequences for the city for more than a millennium.

After Issos (333–331 BC)

The new era came in the wake of Alexander the Great's expedition to the east, intended to settle once and for all the historic struggle between Greeks and Persians. After crossing the Hellespont in 334 BC, Alexander swept through Asia Minor, rolling back Persia's empire. Descending to the Plain of Cilicia, he first encountered the vast army of the Persian Emperor, Darius III (r.336–330 BC). By choosing as battleground a narrow stretch of land at Issos, hemmed in between the Amanus Mountains and the sea, Alexander's numerical inferiority mattered little and his superior tactics determined the outcome. Darius 'who watched the battle from a gorgeous chariot drawn by four horses abreast, was driven with the remnants of his army in wild flight eastwards'.¹²

Darius' remaining garrison forces in Syria and Phoenicia represented no threat. Syria lay at Alexander's feet. He proceeded south, taking the traditional but unfailingly dramatic entry point now prosaically called the Beylan Pass but for centuries rightly known as the 'Gates of Syria' (*Pylae Syriae*). The pass leads from the Mediterranean coast across the Amanus Mountains and descends abruptly onto the rich plain of Amuq, watered by the Orontes. Alexander was reluctant to set off in pursuit of Darius who had fled eastwards into Persia. Instead, he decided to continue south towards Egypt, securing Phoenicia on the way. He paid no attention to the interior of Syria though he did send his general, Parmenion, to the main centre of the Persian satrapy, Damascus. Here Darius had sent his heavy baggage, his war treasure and his concubines for safe keeping before the Battle of Issos. (His choice had been dictated by the city's administrative role as well as by the fact that it was a walled city which offered reasonable protection.)

While Parmenion branched towards Damascus, Alexander paused at Marathos (now Amrit whose Achaemenid temple was discussed above). The local ruler, Gerostratos, based on the neighbouring island of Arados (Arwad), reflected the

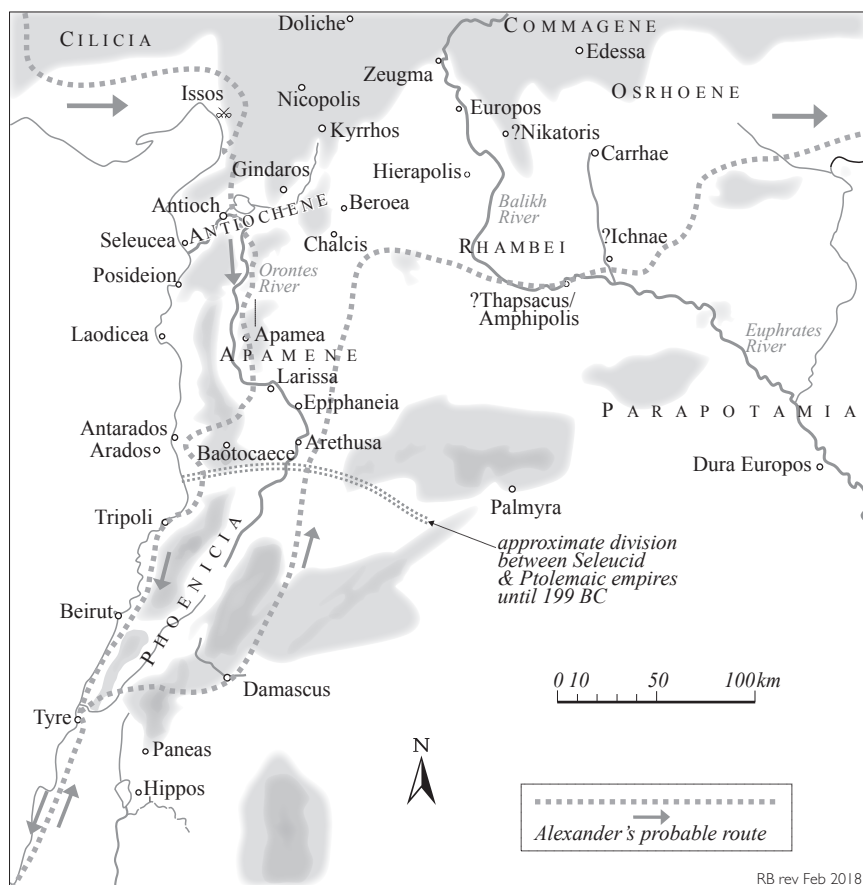


FIGURE 3.3 Alexander's route, Hellenistic Syria

Syrian reaction to the arrival of the Greeks. Once he saw how the wind was blowing (that is, which way the island's trading interests could best be advanced), Gerostratos gave allegiance to Alexander and put his fleet at the Greek's disposal. The city received a small Macedonian colony but on the whole simply returned to its traditional Phoenician habit of trading with anyone and everyone.¹³

Parmenion reported his mission to Damascus in 332 BC an unqualified success. Though the general had set out for Damascus with forces barely adequate for a siege, resistance was nil. As he trudged through the Qalamoun north of Damascus amid the snowstorms of a bitter winter, the city sent envoys asking Parmenion to receive their surrender and to take charge of Darius' war chest. To avoid the need to have the Macedonian force occupy the city, the Persian governor of Damascus proposed a subterfuge. He would, before the Greeks' arrival, send the residual Persian contingent north accompanying the Achaemenid treasury, household and baggage train. It was so cold that many of the baggage handlers decked themselves

in Darius' gold brocades. Under the plan suggested by the Persian governor,¹⁴ the Macedonians intercepted the Persian train, scattered the armed followers of the King of Kings, captured the household staff (including 329 concubines later discreetly inventoried as 'trained in music') and seized the treasury.

The royal treasure was now littered throughout the plains: the cash accumulated to pay the men (a massive sum), the clothes of so many high-ranking men and so many distinguished women, golden vessels, golden bridles, tents elaborately decorated on a royal scale and wagons full of enormous wealth, abandoned by their owners. It was a sight to sadden even the looters – if there were anything that could arrest their greed! For now a fortune of amazing and unbelievable proportions, which had been hoarded up over many years, was being rooted out by the looters, some of it torn by bramble bushes, some of it sunk in the mud.¹⁵

A governor of Damascus, Memnon, was appointed and charged with planning the defences of southern Syria. Alexander's intention to implant the Greek presence in Damascus was confirmed by the early establishment of a mint. In acquitting his mission, Parmenion also sent to Alexander Darius' wife, Barsine, whose beauty and Greek education commended her to Alexander.¹⁶

Most of the coastal cities of Phoenicia welcomed Alexander on his progress south. They were already comfortable with Greek control, having housed sizeable Greek communities or traded with Aegean centres. They quickly won recognition as city-states and thus retained a degree of independence under the Greek system. One city held out against this pattern of easy compliance, the Phoenician coastal centre of Tyre, which Alexander was obliged to besiege for seven months; an operation which proved to be the toughest challenge of his career. Tyre, the premier city of the Phoenician world, had a proud record of independence and had resisted such conquerors as Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar. Moreover, the city believed it could hold out on its island separated by 70 metres from the mainland with the help of other Phoenician fleets. It calculated wrongly as Alexander built a mole up to its defences. Its sister cities had already handed over their war fleets to the Macedonian. While the rest of Syria went over meekly, Tyre paid dearly: 200 of its citizens were hanged and 30,000 reputedly deported into slavery.

Alexander's diversion to Egypt need not detain us here. On his return north to resume the hunt for Darius he seems to have struck inland, leaving the coast at Tyre and probably took the opportunity to pass via Damascus on his way to the Euphrates in 331 BC. There is no record of his stop in the provincial capital but there are reasons why it would seem logical. The administration of Syria needed attention. Alexander's original attempts to find viable appointees as governors of Syria (retaining the Persian title of 'satrap') had not proved successful; there were to be three in the two years before Asclepiodorus of Macedon ruled the province from 331 to 328 BC. Alexander went on to cross the Euphrates River at Thapsacus,

a site whose location is still disputed but seems likely to have been somewhere along the stretch of river now flooded by the main Euphrates dam.

The defeat of Darius at the Battle of Arbela in 331 BC confirmed Syria was to remain under the Macedonians. The rest of Alexander's career in the east had little immediate impact on Syria or Damascus though it was important for Alexander to retain control of Syria and thus his sea lifeline to Greece and Macedonia. The struggle for the Achaemenid realms was more of a close contest than the Ancient Greek historians acknowledged from their vantage of hindsight. Darius' murder in 330 BC by one of his generals was the crucial blow to the Achaemenid cause but even then the Persian forces fought on. Amélie Kuhrt has pointed out that Darius could not have been such an ineffective ruler if it took Alexander 12 years of hard campaigning, province by province including three major set-piece battles, to weaken the Achaemenid hold on their vast empire.¹⁷

The long campaign as far as India fatally sapped Alexander's energies and his troops' morale. He died at Babylon in 323 BC. His body was carried westwards in its funerary progress towards Egypt, the cortège stopping in Damascus in 321 BC¹⁸ accompanied by the regent, Perdiccas. There it was met by an army led by Ptolemy, Alexander's designated successor in Egypt, who escorted it to Alexandria, perhaps to prevent Perdiccas from using this excuse to pluck Egypt from him. This struggle for the succession would last decades. Initially assigned on Alexander's death to Laomedon of Mytilene, the Syrian mantle was seized by Ptolemy and then by Antigonos. The founder of the Seleucid dynasty, Seleucus I Nicator (r.311–281 BC), took northern Syria after defeating Antigonos at the Battle of Ipsos in 301 BC, but the south reverted to Ptolemaic control, an outcome disputed for the next hundred years.

A Hellenic millennium

The Greek period is as elusive as it is pervasive in Syria's history. There are many points when what was happening on the ground in cities such as Damascus is almost impossible to reconstruct in any detail, particularly when Syria had temporarily slipped away from the world stage. Yet the Greek period is seminal in Syria's development over the next millennium. At a time when the Mediterranean world was becoming increasingly accessible, when a true world civilisation was emerging and trends in historical and philosophical thought converging, it is still largely a mystery how all this applied in Syria. Almost 250 years of Greek rule have left almost nothing on the ground; the sheer scale of the later Roman presence obliterated its predecessor. The redevelopment was so thorough, the appropriation of the Hellenic tradition so pervasive that the tentative roots were simply buried. Perhaps there will turn out to be more settlements or forts where the Greek remains were not later built upon by the Romans in the seven centuries of their rule but only two have so far been identified and researched.¹⁹

It quickly became evident that Damascus was not a focus of Seleucid concerns. It initially retained some status as a former satrapal capital as the Greeks recognised

that, given the polyglot population of their eastern domains, it would be expedient in ruling non-Greek populations to follow the old Persian administrative practice rather than import structures and philosophies intact from Greece. Thus the satrap became a *strategos*, a Greek general who held his authority from the king. Unlike the Persians who had maintained Damascus as the seat of a governor, the Seleucids preferred a base in the north, the mid-point between mainland Greece and their rich provinces to the east. If the successors to Alexander had agreed on a unified structure for their Levantine conquests, the problem might not have arisen. Instead of remaining a crossroads, Damascus was stranded in no man's land between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies, rival dynasties competing for Alexander's unwieldy empire. This tension was not to be resolved for a century, deferring the development of Damascus as a Greek centre until the second century BC.

Notes

- 1 Dion 1997: 216.
- 2 Damascus, for example, served as a base for Assurbanipal's campaign (mid-seventh century) against the 'Nabaiati'. Once thought to be the first historical mention of the Nabataeans, the Arab group which would in future have a considerable influence on Damascus' fortunes, 'Nabaiati' is now seen as more likely a reference to the Nebaioth of the Bible.
- 3 Kuhrt 1995 II: 590.
- 4 Liverani 2006: 198.
- 5 Herodotus I 134, Sélincourt (trans.) 1954: 69–70.
- 6 Kuhrt 1995 II: 674.
- 7 Kuhrt 1995 II: 697; Sartre 2001: 89 consider the Phoenician coast as possibly a separate satrapy.
- 8 Dentzer in Gaube and Fansa 2000: 99.
- 9 Watzinger and Wulzinger 1921: 41–42; Dussaud 1922: 221. Also Graf 1987: 15 on possibly Persian-influenced capitals at Si'a.
- 10 Bounni 1999.
- 11 Jones 1937: 237; Sartre 2001: 58–59 give a picture of close integration into the Achaemenid system; Graf 1987: 14 on the Persian 'royal road'.
- 12 Hitti 1951: 232.
- 13 The local monarch nominally survived as a 'friendly' ally of the Macedonian kings until his position was quietly dropped.
- 14 The governor was later murdered by an accomplice loyal to Darius to whom the head was presented as a trophy – Briant 1996: 864.
- 15 Quintus Curtius *History of Alexander*, John Yardley (trans.) 2001: 3, 13, 10–11.
- 16 Green 1990: 243–250.
- 17 Kuhrt 1995 II: 675.
- 18 Sartre 2001: 100.
- 19 The most completely studied example is the remarkable Hellenistic fortress at Jebel Khalid on the Euphrates where the temple remains show a conscious mix of cultures – Clarke 2015.

4

THE SOWING OF HELLENISM

Ptolemies and Seleucids (300–64 BC)

Ptolemaic rule – third century BC

The line between the territory of two competing dynastic houses, Ptolemaic and Seleucid, was probably never very firm but for most of the third century BC it ran a little to the south of present-day Homs. Most of what is now Lebanon was Ptolemaic territory, along with its interior reaching as far as Damascus, but it is likely that the coastal cities retained considerable autonomy. It is equally probable that Ptolemaic control of their Syrian territory was never particularly well developed or unified. The extent of Ptolemaic administration is an enigma like much of the detail of their rule outside the central lands of Egypt. ‘Syria’ was one of the outlying territories of the Ptolemaic realm along with Phoenicia, Cyprus and Cyrenaica (the eastern coast of present-day Libya). At the administrative level, it is not clear whether southern Syria had the full status of a separate province or was grouped among the districts ruled by the *dioiketes* (finance minister), possibly at Alexandria. The territorial division between Ptolemies and Seleucids separated more than two squabbling Greek dynasties; it marked two traditions which spawned profoundly contrasting systems. The Ptolemies quickly took on the colouring of the pharaonic past with the style and structure of a highly centralised monarchy. In Seleucid Syria, a warrior dynasty set itself up in northern Syria in circumstances that consciously copied the Macedonian homeland.

While Damascus had been an important centre for the Persians, it was probably not seen by the Ptolemies as a vital asset. In southern Syria and Palestine, the Ptolemaic system was loosely applied and the Egyptian tradition of a heavily state-directed economy worked only marginally. The Phoenician coast of what is now Lebanon with its splendid cities (Tyre, Sidon, Byblos) that had managed to retain their economic status throughout the Assyrian and Persian periods was the major prize. The fact that the Phoenician kings were deposed and their towns converted

into republics gave them new momentum as thriving trading centres. Inland, the Beqa'a Valley was a resource whose beauty and abundant fertility made it a highly attractive acquisition. Beyond the next mountain range, however, Damascus lay on the edge of the wilderness facing the lawless reaches of the desert, prey to the competing influence of nomadic tribes.

We have no information on the name that the Ptolemaic Greeks applied to Damascus, though there are indications that it was 'refounded' and given one of the standard dynastic labels, Arsinoe, under Ptolemy II Philadelphus (r.285–246 BC). Its position well down the scale of major centres of the early Greek period reflected its economic decline. With Damascus in Ptolemaic hands, the desert short cut from the Seleucid-held Euphrates via the Palmyra oasis, once utilised to send eastern products via Damascus to the Phoenician coast, was now non-viable. It is thus not surprising that the coin issue from Damascus lapsed after 320 BC, the mint not being brought back into operation until two centuries later. Damascus, while probably not definitively claimed by the Ptolemies until 276 BC, was contested by the Seleucids during each of the four 'Syrian Wars' that punctuated the dynastic rivalries of the third century. The town may have taken on an increasingly important military role, given its position bordering the ill-defined buffer zone to the north. In the peace treaty signed in 253 BC after the second Syrian War, Syria Coele (including Damascus) seems to have been ceded to the Seleucid Antiochus II Theos as part of the dowry of his Ptolemaic wife, Berenice Syra. It remained in Seleucid hands until Ptolemy III Euergetes retook it during the third Syrian War (245–241 BC) and it stayed under the Ptolemies until the end of the century.

Damascus between rival dynasties

Whereas the Seleucids made no sustained bid for Damascus before 202 BC, in northern Syria the dynasty put a major effort into implanting their presence. Foiled in their plans to be undisputed lords of Asia Minor and conscious that their hold over the daisy chain of provinces stretching to India was at best ephemeral, they increasingly fell back on their 'New Macedonia' in the north-west corner of Syria. Antioch near the Orontes mouth had been their major centre since 300 BC when Seleucus chose it as his capital.¹ Antioch became one of four pivotal cities that sustained the Greek presence. The others were Seleucia (at the Orontes mouth), Laodicea (Latakia, now Syria's major seaport) and Apamea on the edge of the mid-Orontes valley that became the principal garrison city and the base for the permanent cavalry.

From this quadrilateral on which colonial settlement concentrated, the Macedonian/Greek presence in Syria spread out along several branches. It consolidated along the north Syrian coast where some cities had already housed colonies of Greek merchants or settlers. It spread inland to Beroea where a Greek town was set alongside the Semitic settlement on the site of present-day Aleppo. It reached south along the Orontes Valley to take in colonies scattered between repopulated towns such as Larissa (Shaizar) and Epiphaneia (Hama). It may also later have

touched areas of inland Syria including the region around the military colony at Dura Europos on the mid-Euphrates. Seleucid Syria had little need to look further south except to ward off occasional attempts by the Ptolemies to spread their influence northwards. Its main economic lifeline remained the route to the Seleucid domains to the east, notably to Mesopotamia which had been the initial base of the Seleucid kingdom.

For at least the first century of Greek rule, Damascus or Arsinoe thus found itself bypassed in every sense. Its political base had tumbled; it was liable to change hands between the rival dynasties; its role as a trading centre diminished. Moreover, it seems not to have had an implanted Greek colonial population until perhaps much later. Unlike the Seleucids who planted Greek cities everywhere, the Ptolemies took on the colouring of the pharaonic past. They had no need to draw on the resources of manpower in mainland Greece. They established only one new city in Egypt, Ptolemais in Upper Egypt. Nominally, in Palestine, they 'founded' some 30 cities but these were largely renamings of existing settlements using few imported Greeks. Reflecting the Egyptian inheritance and a more absolutist and centralised style of government, cities were an inconvenience. 'The landscape of most of (Ptolemaic) Syria . . . was essentially rural, consisting of numerous scattered villages, with very few urban centres'.²

Moreover, the Ptolemies were not going to waste their manpower on marginal territory such as Damascus. Attempts to 'Hellenise' local institutions were probably cursory. 'Arsinoe' quickly lapsed back to its Semitic identity, reverting to a Greek version of its old name – Damaskos. The centres to its south, later grouped under the title of 'Decapolis', do not seem to have attracted much Greek interest. The view once held by classical scholars of the Greeks implanting democracy all over the Hellenised east through the establishment of self-governing urban centres seems to have been excessively idealistic. In most cases, the settlements were not democratic transplants from Greece but essentially 'royal cities', useful as booty or to be exploited as the private property of the monarch.

The Ptolemies' more centralised monarchy ran things differently. There is no evidence that Damascus enjoyed the urban institutions needed to play any prominent role in the Ptolemaic system. Its largely 'native' population was simply expected to pay its dues to the overlords in Alexandria through sophisticated systems for culling customs revenues and taxes on items such as wine. Nor is there any evidence that Alexandria encouraged the development of Greek institutions such as *gymnasias* to foster Greek ideals and education as in other Ptolemaic possessions, notably Cyprus or Cyrenaica. Cut off from the easy interchange that the sea connection provided, Damascus in the third century BC probably remained a Semitic city administered by outsiders rather than a city based on common Greek ideals and a transplanted Greek population.

Seleucid rule – second century BC

What caused the city's fortunes to recover was the expulsion of the Ptolemies by Antiochus III ('the Great'). After an initial abortive attempt to recover Ptolemaic



FIGURE 4.1 Antiochus III

Source: P. Gardner *A Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum – The Seleucid Kings of Syria*, London: British Museum 1878: pl. VIII 5

Syria (Fourth Syrian War, 219–217 BC) that resulted in a decisive victory for the Ptolemies at Raphia (Rafa, Gaza–Egypt border), Antiochus switched his attention to the recovery of the eastern provinces as far as Bactria on the border of India. He returned to the Syrian question in the fifth in the series of wars between the two Greek houses (202–195 BC). By allying himself with Philip V of Macedon, the task of depriving Egypt of its remote provinces was made easier given the weakened state of the Ptolemaic dynasty under the child-king, Ptolemy V Epiphanes. Damascus was the first prize to fall, in 202 BC. The coastal cities of Phoenicia resisted more strongly and it was not until 198 BC that Antiochus III had installed Seleucid rule in all of Syria, leaving a Ptolemaic high official in charge of the newly incorporated province of Syria-Phoenicia.

This was the high point for the Seleucids. Antiochus III reigned almost four decades (223–187 BC) and brought a stability to the empire which it had not so far enjoyed. His final years, however, were to be dogged by Rome's increasing inroads into the eastern Mediterranean. Antiochus managed to fend off decline but his attempts to maintain Seleucid influence as far as Bactria proved to be his undoing. After the humiliation of his loss to Rome at Thermopylae in 189 BC, he was forced to sign the Treaty of Apamea of Phrygia (188 BC) which gave Rome a foothold in Asia Minor and required Antiochus to renounce any claim on the area. Rebuffed in the west, he left his son (soon to rule alone as Seleucus IV Philopator, r.187–175 BC) as regent in Antioch and set out once more towards the east, seeking to reconsolidate the remnants of Alexander's realm. Like other would-be successors to Alexander, he was killed the next year in humiliating circumstances, by a mob of disaffected eastern subjects who objected to his despoiling a temple of Nanaia in the province of Elam (western Iran). A man of 'energy and mercurial brilliance rather than solidity',³ whose ambitions had been checked to the west and east, it was essentially his extension of Seleucid control over all of Syria that justified his claim to the label of greatness and gave the empire a new focus.

Antiochus III's rule represented the peak of attempts to spread a Greek presence beyond the original colonial ventures in northern Syria. It was, however, at best a fragile balance between the multi-ethnic populations of the main centres. While much of the economy was skewed to reflect the interests of the Greek settlers and traders, the Semitic population and the remnants of earlier civilisations formed the sea in which the islands of Hellenistic influence sat. Greek culture for the Seleucids was enshrined in urban centres and it was by granting greater autonomy to the Greek populations of the Syrian cities that Antiochus most effectively advanced the spread of Hellenistic civilisation, perhaps consciously seeking to revive some aspects of the classic age three centuries earlier. It is less clear, however, what success he had in encouraging any fusion of populations or whether the balance remained largely an uneasy one between colonial masters and local underclass.

The theoretical model was classical Athens but the democratic tradition was not much stronger among the Seleucids than it had been under the neo-pharaonic Ptolemies. In some cities, usually only late in the Hellenistic period, the people (*demos*) participated in power through a general assembly (*ecclesia*) which elected a city council (*boule*) to run the city. The full status of citizenship was only extended to the cities' Greek inhabitants or those selectively assimilated to Greek culture through education or intermarriage. In some parts of Syria, particularly in the cities of Phoenician origin along the coast, local traditions of city autonomy were tolerated under Greek tutelage. Eventually, especially in the first century BC, as the Hellenistic system began to fragment under the pressure of constant wars, local dynasts, often of Arab origin, began to take more overt control. This was the case in Emesa (Homs) or in the lands occupied by the Ituraeans, a small principality to the north-west of Damascus.⁴

There were numerous smaller provincial centres and villages. Different cities or regions had distinct forms of political status. Some cities, for example, had their own charter negotiated with the king that gave them a certain independence. A fairly strict hierarchy described their descending scale of rights but all had to pass on a heavy proportion of their product to the state. Land tenure was complicated. In theory, much of the territory was the king's personal possession; in practice, large slabs of land were granted to cities that shared the income with the ruler. Other land had been handed over to military colonies (*katoikiai*) comprising Greek veterans (*kleruchs*) or other communities brought in from mainland Greece and settled on lots divided on a strictly egalitarian and symmetrical basis (*kleroi*). The greater part of the arable land, however, was converted to royal estates tilled by indigenous (largely Semitic) serfs forced into a subservient existence. Some marginal land survived alienation in exchange for tribute. Estates previously controlled by local temple priesthoods continued but were now required to pass on their revenues to the king.

The persistence of the plan

There are few written or archaeological sources for the history of Damascus under Greek rule. A bit of detective work is now needed to take the story further.

The main guide is the city itself: its street layout, the occasional signs of a column or wall poking through the modern-day fabric, the tell-tale evidence of place names and the persistence with which religious practices centre on certain spots. Attempts to read these signs go back to European interest in the city following the great fire in the Umayyad Mosque in 1893 and the fascination with the city's history shown by Kaiser Wilhelm when he visited Damascus five years later. The Turkish authorities, whose writ was soon to come to an end, began to commission research, most notably the German scholars with the daunting name combination of Carl Watzinger and Karl Wulzinger who compiled two tomes on the city's classical and Islamic history while the Great War was raging around them.

Watzinger and Wulzinger's conclusions about the origins of the Greek and Roman city plan were primordial but it was not long before they were challenged by the French scholars who began work on the history of the city during the Mandate period between the World Wars. French control brought a formidable outpouring of research that still provides the firmest basis we have for understanding Syria's past. Particularly influential were the works of René Dussaud on the temple but above all were those of Jean Sauvaget who perfected the technique of combing the city's streets for manifestations of its classical past and then applying Gallic rigour to the reconstruction of the fragments of evidence. It is only in the last ten years that Sauvaget's work is beginning to be overtaken, and then only marginally, so ruthlessly logical were his conclusions.

The German and French scholars took as their starting point one principle: the persistence of the plan. Once a thorough plan has been embedded in a city's structure, it is very difficult to efface it entirely, even if the urban population changes radically over 20 centuries. With the aid of a cadastre, they discerned in the higgledy-piggledy alleys and lanes of the walled city indications of the strict grid plan that had marked its classical structure. Every now and then, a lane following the orthography of the grid jumps to the next parallel street. A thoroughfare that once strode confidently across the city temporarily ends in a cul-de-sac but resumes

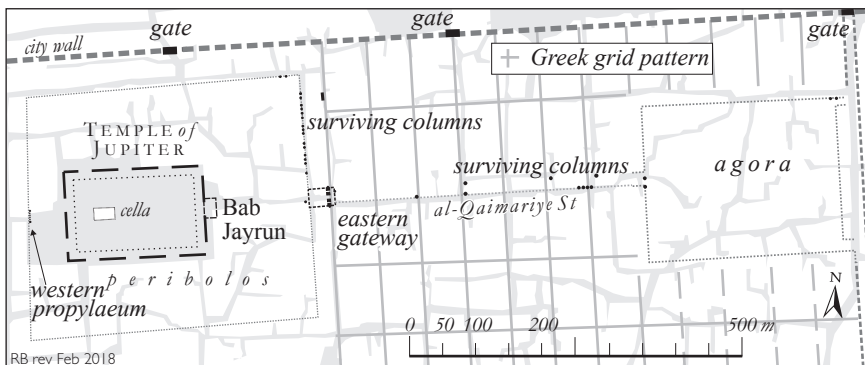


FIGURE 4.2 Eastern approach to the Temple

after leaping a cluster of family homes huddled together for security. To flesh out the plan, place names or literary sources are often invaluable, notably the archive of Arab historical writings.

Sauvaget's thesis that the city's topography and toponymy can tell us much that has been bypassed by the historical record has been vindicated. Take as an example the section of the city plan shown in Figure 4.2 that shows the area north of the central part of Straight Street. (The modern street pattern is superimposed on the ancient grid.) The area is still pierced by a relatively straight road (Qaimariye Street) that ends in the eastern entrance to the Umayyad Mosque. Here at the core of the city refounded by the Greeks this east–west axis symbolically linked the already-ancient temple to the new Greek *agora*, the heart of its civic life. To the north is another, narrower, road that also follows the east–west line of the grid. To the right is an area relatively unmarked by strictly vertical or horizontal lines, the *agora* or open forum/market place of the Greek city now covered by the random tracery of medieval streets.⁵

A Greek city

We simply have no precise information as to when Damascus was redeveloped along these strictly geometric lines. Sauvaget, writing in the 1930s, identified three possible points, namely:

- the creation of a Ptolemaic city, Arsinoe, under Ptolemy Philadelphus (r.285–246 BC) (see page 47);
- the adoption (111 BC) of Damascus as his capital by the Seleucid, Antiochus IX Cyzicinus (r.115–95 BC), who formed a breakaway kingdom in the south;
- the establishment, around 90 BC, of a new Greek colony in Damascus (renamed Demetrias) under the Seleucid king, Demetrius III Philopator, who again formed a separate kingdom named Syria Coele.

Sauvaget also suggested that the three events were not necessarily alternative explanations but could represent successive refoundations of the city.⁶

Given that it was not a new foundation, there is no reason to assume that the city was planned *in toto* like Antioch. Pierre Leriche has recently argued that several Seleucid foundations did not take on the proportions of full grid-planned cities until late in the Hellenistic period – not, as previously assumed, on their foundation.⁷ The historical record would seem to suggest that the second century provided the right context for the city's redevelopment. After the Seleucid take-over, while Damascus remained marginal to Seleucid interests in northern Syria, the city's fortunes improved as Seleucid control spread south. Greater security in the desert areas brought the reopening of the Dura–Palmyra–Damascus route as a short cut for trade in goods between east and west.⁸ Recent research has produced indications that some agricultural land around Damascus was subdivided for resettlement, possibly in conjunction with the restoration of Seleucid control.⁹

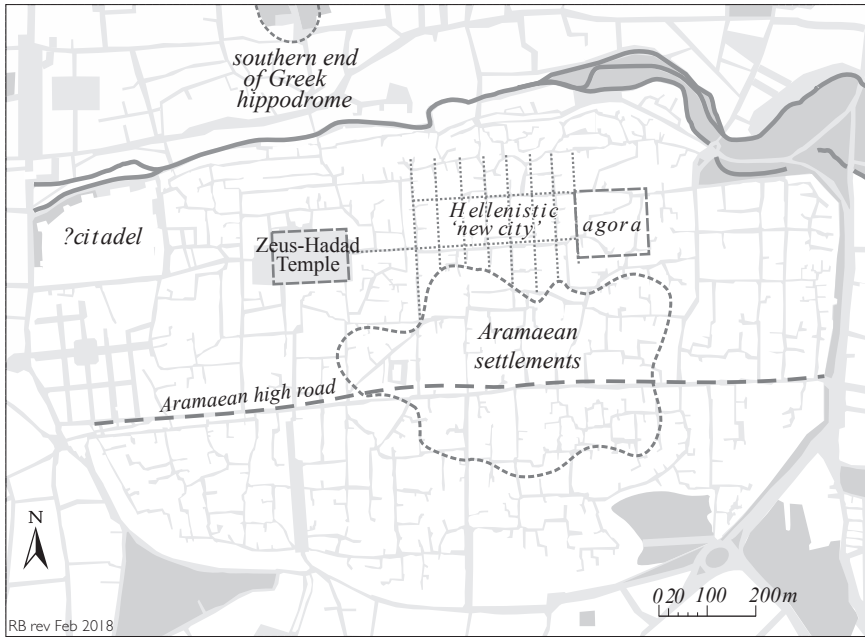


FIGURE 4.3 Hellenistic Damascus

The land to the north and east of the city in the vicinity of the modern Sharia Baghdad was taken over (presumably from its Aramaean owners) and divided into rectangular patches (*kleroi*) reflecting known Hellenistic dimensions, perhaps as part of a program for bringing in Greek veteran settlers. This area of 500 hectares was easily irrigated from the Tora canal. The boundaries of the new subdivision were coordinated with the grid plan of what is now the eastern part of the city, though the two grids were not necessarily established simultaneously.

While it has been argued above that Damascus was not singled out as a major centre for Greek colonisation, it is possible that, like other inland cities of Semitic origin, it was at least partly reorganised along Greek lines in association with a first effort at colonisation. In his history of classical Antioch, Glanville Downey has pointed out that many Greek soldiers were unable or unwilling to return home after the Treaty of Apamea (188 BC) which sanctioned Roman control of Greece¹⁰ and it is possible that the need to settle veterans in new areas dictated the replanning. We know nothing, however, of where the newly introduced inhabitants came from and it is possible they were partly drawn from other Greek settlements in Syria. The Treaty of Apamea certainly ruled out fresh immigration from the homeland.

In the early decades of the second century BC Damascus may have aspired to the attributes of a Greek city. Tscherikower notes that it is easy enough for anyone to give a city a new name and strike a few coins¹¹ but to find the resources to

revitalise the shape of a city, a historically significant figure is needed. The long reign of Antiochus the Great (who died in 187 BC) provided a background level of political stability that might have made this possible. The Seleucids seem to have reintroduced the satrapal system in southern Syria and Damascus could well have been made the capital of the satrapy of Syria Coele, though it seems strange that it was not one of the 19 Seleucid cities authorised to issue coins until much later in the century (135–134 BC) when it housed a subsidiary of the royal mint in Antioch.¹²

This refurbishment of Damascus might also have reflected the continuing prosperity of the second quarter of the century, coinciding with the high point of efforts to Hellenise the Kingdom under Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BC). Antiochus IV, an ‘odd, and perhaps in some ways an unbalanced, character’,¹³ might have taken an interest in this sort of ambitious project. He was a great builder, an exponent of ‘theatrical philhellenism’. He not only provided Antioch with a new quarter, Epiphaneia, which included a magnificent temple later described by Livy¹⁴ as dedicated to Jupiter Capitolinus, but founded (or refounded) Epiphaneia (Hama) on the Orontes and Nisibis en route to the Tigris. Such projects formed part of his program of consolidating Hellenism, seeking to advance further the tradition of his father, Antiochus the Great, but with a greater emphasis on the blending of Hellenic and oriental traditions. Antiochus sought to promote in his realm the central position of Zeus – the overarching deity seen as the equivalent of the local god of sky, storm and thunder, Hadad-Baal.¹⁵ In Damascus, the existing Temple of Hadad-Zeus was made a dramatic focal point of the new town plan for the city. (At about the same time, resentment against his support for the Hellenisation program in Palestine was building up to the Jewish revolt led by Judas Maccabeus, resulting in 165 BC in the Greek intervention and profanation of the temple.)

In summary, it seems reasonable to conclude that Damascus was redeveloped along more ambitious lines, perhaps in phases, between 200 and 120 BC. A tidier quadrilateral emerged, reflecting the typical grid design propagated in the Greek world by Hippodamus of Miletus, an architect and town planner of the fifth



FIGURE 4.4 Antiochus IV

Source: Gardner 1878: pl. XI 8

century who built or remodelled many Greek cities along strict geometric lines. By Alexander's time, his grid had become standard practice for Greek 'new city' design and was found in all the settlements left in Alexander's wake as far as Taxila in northern Pakistan. In Syria, the Hippodamian grid was the basis of numerous towns established or rebuilt in the Greek period: Antioch, Seleucia, Apamea, Laodicea (Latakia), Aleppo, Dura Europos and Beirut, among others. The grid size adopted in Damascus was considerably smaller than the Seleucid foundations to the north, again suggesting that it was not part of a grand imperial program but evolved separately.

The Greek city certainly had circuit walls but we have no idea how their configuration might have related to today's version. The area enclosed was smaller than the present 115 hectares. Within the walls, the Greek grid was more or less aligned to the compass. The central axis, as we have seen, joined two cardinal points in the Greek city plan – the *agora* or open square for popular assembly to the east and the temple to the west – symbolically uniting the city's commercial and religious life. Straight Street, which was to become the great colonnaded axis of Roman times, was probably still a straggling improvised route joining the Aramaean settlements and forming the southern limit of the Greek plan. (This explanation has the great virtue of clarifying why Straight Street, whose linear eccentricities have drawn two millennia of sarcastic remarks, never even started out straight!)

Although we can gain on the ground or from a map some appreciation of the scale of the Greek city, virtually all the detail escapes us. The lack of any large-scale excavations of the city in modern times means there has been no chance to find out more about the layout of the Greek temple or gain any information on other constructions within the city walls. The population of the city at this time can only be guessed. We know from literary references that Antioch was estimated to have around 10,000 free citizens. The city covered around 225 hectares, a more or less standard area for a Seleucid 'new city' (e.g. Laodicea and Apamea) but this excluded the 'native' settlements outside the walls. Damascus (half this size) was probably much more lightly populated, at least by Greeks.

We have noted above that recent research¹⁶ seems to confirm that the grid of the Greek settlement occupied only the northern part of the present walled city, with the earlier Aramaean settlements well to the south of the temple–*agora* axis. The 'natives' almost certainly outnumbered the Greeks but kept to their traditional villages that had become partly embraced within the city limits. As Aramaeans were selectively assimilated to citizenship, the division between Greek and 'native' quarters grew less marked. Unlike other Syrian towns, since Aramaean times Damascus had had no monarchical tradition and had been directly ruled by its conquerors since the Assyrians. Accustomed to foreign rule, it seems to have made the transition to 'self-governing' urban republic under resident Greek tutelage with ease. Damascus slowly became a more distinctly Greek city run by Greeks or locals who aspired to or attained Greek citizenship.

As the Greek lifestyle became more widespread, a hippodrome was constructed on the western edge of the newly subdivided agricultural area north of the city.

The shape of the hippodrome's footprint can still be discerned in the area of the Dahdah cemetery (north of al-Malik al-Feisal Street).

Greek cities were allowed to fortify themselves both as a reflection of their self-governing status and to protect the new master race. Most Hellenistic foundations or refoundations thus included some form of citadel or protected camp within their limits, usually on a prominent rise towards the edge of the city perimeter. Damascus had no natural prominence of any note to serve as the site of a military installation. It is quite possible, though, that the Greek citadel (the *akra* of Josephus) was located west of the temple, the spot where the Roman and Arab citadels were later established.¹⁷

Temple of Zeus

The temple compound continued to dominate the whole life of the city, just as its successor, the Mosque of the Umayyads, does today. We have seen (page 54) that the cult of Damascene Zeus may well have fitted into Antiochus IV's plans for the promotion of Zeus as the central deity in the pantheon. Assimilated with Hadad, Zeus is also depicted on contemporary coins in Semitic guise, holding thunderbolts in his hands and standing between two bulls.¹⁸ The approach to the new temple from the east along the *via sacra* which led from the *agora* was meant to overawe. The scale of the project, even allowing that the later Roman temple to Jupiter-Hadad improved on its Greek precursor, must have been overwhelmingly impressive to the local population, not accustomed to the dimensions of Greek temples and their majestic symmetry.

Leaving aside the scale, the basic design of the compound remained essentially Semitic rather than Greek, whatever style might have been chosen for the architectural elements and the ornamentation. A walled courtyard (*temenos*), open to the sky, was a successor to the Aramaean *haram* or sacred area designated to receive crowds of visitors on days of pilgrimage. At the centre stood the *cella* in which the



FIGURE 4.5 Zeus-Hadad, coin of Antiochus XII

Source: René Dussaud 1922: fig. 1

image of the god was honoured.¹⁹ The Damascus temple complex thus stood as a symbol of the Hellenistic age's attempts, however imperfect, to establish a synthesis between Greek civilisation and its eastern, largely Semitic, predecessors.

A Hellenistic civilisation?

It would be easy to minimise the achievements of the Hellenistic kingdoms, to see them as having reduced the democratic ideals to a thinly disguised form of despotism and to contrast reality with the idealised image of a civilisation uniting Greek and oriental. It has become more obvious to modern historians that the precarious nature of Seleucid political control reinforced the temptations of oriental despotism. The Hellenistic empires may well have been little more than moneymaking ventures for the Greek-Macedonian barons who parcelled up or squabbled endlessly over Alexander's inheritance. Greek Syria, however, was not always the unmitigated disaster played up by the Romans as the excuse for their entry. After the humiliation of the Persian period, Syria recovered under Greek hegemony. Its coastal cities flourished in a new environment. The old trade routes to the Aegean via Asia Minor having fallen prey to political uncertainty, the Syrian coast became the gateway to the west. Inland cities like Damascus that served the trade profited. From the second century BC, Arab confederations based on centres such as Palmyra exerted sufficient control over the nomadic Arab tribes of the desert to ensure trade via the central route flourished. Syria again became a highway, laying the groundwork for its extraordinary prosperity in the Roman period. Though the number of implanted Greek settlers was probably never great, they gave a new stimulus to agriculture. Syria's industries were less successful and its technological base only developed towards the end of the period. Only Greek or assimilated males in the cities enjoyed unfettered rights of citizens. But there was a degree of intermarriage and the rights of local communities probably came to be partially respected as the rate of admissions to full citizenship increased.

The tussle between the forces of Hellenisation and the persistence of native Semitic traditions is the underlying theme of the classical millennium in Syria. It is easy to concentrate on the superficial setbacks, to note how the unravelling of the Seleucid power revealed the underlying fragility and contradictions of the imported models. In fact, we have remarkably little evidence of any resistance in Syria (excluding Palestine) to the Greek presence, as long as it remained strong and coherent; and even less evidence of any resistance to the process of Hellenisation which, as Maurice Sartre has recently shown us, had a great capacity to adapt to local situations, religious and otherwise.²⁰ In the long run, Hellenism did seep through much of Syria, even if it was often no more than just a taste for the prestige of a classical pediment or column. Ironically, its golden age came with Rome's endorsement of Hellenism in its eastern provinces. The Hellenic tradition survived in a new form in the Late Roman/Byzantine world and even influenced much of the outlook of the early Arab dynasty, the Umayyads. It lasted well over a thousand years, long outliving the dynasties that brought it to this exotic environment.

The resistance of the Jews of Palestine who had previously enjoyed administrative and legal autonomy illustrates the limits of the Hellenisation process. As Damascus is only some 200 kilometres up the road from Jerusalem, it would not be surprising if the situation of the Jews had a powerful exemplary effect for the still largely Semitic population of Damascus. Jewish traders had probably settled there since before their first exile to Babylon and certainly by Persian times. Jews are said by Josephus to have been encouraged to settle in Syria and were given citizenship under Seleucus I. After the brutal suppression of the revolt of 165 BC, the Hasmonaean Kingdom in Jerusalem brought an uneasy compromise between the Jews and their Hellenised surroundings, sufficient to facilitate a strong role for the kingdom in the region at the expense of the Seleucids.²¹

Yet there could be no greater contrast, it would seem, between the growing turmoil of Jewish–Greek relations in Jerusalem and the apparently uneventful course of relations between Greeks and Semites in Damascus. Contrast the reactions of the Jews led by Judas Maccabeus in 168 BC to the attempts to convert the Jerusalem temple compound to Greek norms with the merging of Greek and Semitic gods' identities in the Zeus–Hadad temple complex in Damascus. If we assume that the replanning of Damascus along Greek lines was under way about this time, is it too much to speculate that the sheer scale and ambition of the new plan for Damascus and the bold central place given to the Temple of Hadad was partly meant as an example of how Hellenisation could work?

For a while, anyway. The Seleucid Kingdom, by the late second century BC, was again increasingly divided by dynastic struggles that paved the way for incursions by peripheral principalities. Yet in the midst of this growing chaos, Damascus took on a new role, at least temporarily. In 111 BC, Antiochus IX marked his bid to establish himself in power away from the stronghold of his brother, Antiochus VIII Grypos, and the 'hothouse unreality' of the Seleucid court²² and moved the capital temporarily to Damascus. After further dynastic disputes, Demetrius III Philopator (95–88 BC) also made a fresh start from Damascus which had remained loyal to the Seleucids in yet another struggle against Ptolemaic pretenders.



FIGURE 4.6 Antiochus IX

Source: Gardner 1878: pl. XXIV 8



FIGURE 4.7 Demetrius III

Source: Gardner 1878: pl. XXVI 10

He ‘refounded’ Damascus in 90 BC and established it as his capital under the name ‘Demetrias’.

By this time, however, the Seleucid Kingdom of Syria was hopelessly moth-eaten. Seleucid attempts to hold a system of direct rule in place in southern Syria largely collapsed. Quasi-independence had already been conceded to the Jewish kingdom in 152 BC. Other large pieces of the imperial patchwork had either been allowed to assert their identity as independent principalities (for example Emesa, now effectively an Arab principality under the Samsigeramus dynasty) or had been appropriated by neighbouring states. Damascus, still theoretically an autonomous Greek city, felt particularly hemmed in. Samsigeramus’ territory spread as far south as Yabrud, 70 kilometres north of Damascus. The Ituraean principality dominated much of the Beqa’a Valley and Mount Lebanon to the west from its capital at Chalcis (just over the present-day Syria–Lebanon border), thus controlling Damascus’ direct access to the sea.

But the greatest intrusion on the city’s space was to the south and east where the rising power was the kingdom of the Nabataeans. The Nabataeans enjoyed extensive links to the Arabian Peninsula and had begun the transition from nomadic to settled life well before the Hellenistic period.²³ They successfully resisted an early Hellenistic attempt to take them over in 312 BC. Their lucrative trade in incense and aromatics from southern Arabia to Gaza on the Mediterranean continued to flourish. Their great advantage was their impregnable base in the natural fortification of Petra whose rock ramparts they would later embellish in a rich late-Hellenistic style. After the trade in aromatics suffered a heavy blow from the Hasmonaeans’ takeover of Gaza around 100 BC, the Nabataeans were forced to look north to protect their other options for reaching the coast, in the process federating with other Arab groups. By the early first century BC their influence probably already reached into the Hauran, south of Damascus.

Though the Seleucids had sought to make Damascus a bastion of Hellenism in the region, such initiatives to shore up their rule failed to stem the resurgence of the Semitic groups in the area.²⁴ Nabataean influence grew as Seleucid power

declined. Antiochus XII, who also sought to make Damascus his base, lost in battle to the Nabataeans in 87 BC. The Nabataean King, Aretas III, was then invited by the desperate citizens of Damascus to protect the city from the encroachment of the Ituraeans, notorious for banditry and general unreliability.²⁵

The Nabataeans settled in a new eastern quarter, possibly an extension to the city later incorporated into the formal urban area under the Romans.²⁶ The Nabataeans stayed 15 years in Damascus and appear to have brought a semblance of stable rule, perhaps seeing themselves as the heirs of the Seleucids. (They issued coinage from Damascus, for example, closely imitating the Greek style.²⁷) They had already sustained the efforts of the city-states south of Damascus, later titled the Decapolis, to resist any efforts by the Hasmonaeans to expand across the Jordan and into the Hauran. But much of the intervening zone between Damascus and the Hauran remained a wilderness that gave refuge to bandits and the disaffected, where even the towns were dominated by 'petty kings, local tyrants and brigand chiefs'.²⁸ Northern Syria was no more stable and by the early decades of the first century was at the mercy of increasingly powerful kingdoms, including a new Arab state with its capital at Edessa (modern Sanliurfa in Turkey). The Armenian kingdom under Tigranes, however, was the most powerful and even brought its army as far south as Damascus in 72 BC, chasing out the Nabataeans. The Seleucids had lost all semblance of control and Damascus, after a two-year Armenian occupation, maintained a precarious independent presence on the edge of a very turbulent sea.

Notes

- 1 Antioch replaced the earlier site at Antigonía selected by Alexander. Located on the Orontes bend 8 kilometres to the east, Antigonía may either have been an early victim of the river's capricious changes of course or failed to provide an adequate source of water for its inhabitants.
- 2 Graf 1994: 13.
- 3 Green 1990: 423.
- 4 Schottroff *On the Ituraeans* 1982.
- 5 The reconstruction in Figure 4.2 reflects the Roman temple remains but it seems likely that the Greek temple followed a similar alignment.
- 6 Sauvaget 1934: 438, echoing Tscherikower 1927: 66–67.
- 7 Leriche 2000.
- 8 Rostovtzeff 1932: 96; Schmidt-Colinet and al-As'ad 2000: 62. Jones 1937: 266 and Tarn 1961: 244 put this around 100 BC.
- 9 Dodinet *et al.* 1990: 352 speculate on the possibility of a date around the time of Antiochus III, Seleucus IV or Antiochus IV (i.e. between 223 and 164 BC). Sartre 2001: 212 prefers a later date.
- 10 Downey 1963: 54.
- 11 Tscherikower 1927: 66.
- 12 Graf 1994: 20; Newell 1939: 42.
- 13 Green 1990: 505 cites Polybius 2.6.1–14 who made much of a few harmless eccentricities (26.1) but Green goes on to note Antiochus had more positive qualities. Briant has argued that Greek emigration and colonisation was a conscious policy of the Seleucid kings well into the second century BC. He also points out that under Antiochus IV, a new, third, quarter (Epiphaneia) was established in Antioch by colonists largely drawn from the

- footloose displaced by continuing internal strife on the Greek mainland as well, perhaps, as a few from Asia Minor – Briant 1982 II: 95–97.
- 14 Livy *History of Rome*, book 42, line 20.
 - 15 Rostovtzeff 1941 I: 437; Sartre 2001: 288.
 - 16 Sack 1989a: 9–11.
 - 17 Josephus 1970: 13, 15, 1 (387); Weber 1993: 146 for a full discussion including the probability of its proximity to the hippodrome.
 - 18 We have no direct evidence of an assimilation of Zeus and Hadad in Damascus in Greek times, though the later link to Jupiter seems to confirm it. There is, however, an inscription carved on a column of the Roman theatre in Bosra that refers to 'Zeus Damaskenos', confirming Zeus' association with the city – Freyberger 2000: 216.
 - 19 The lack of any comparable Hellenistic urban temple plans in the region has recently been partly remedied by research on the early phases of classical Gadara, Umm Qeis in northern Jordan. There the Greek temple comprised a *cella* centrally located in what appears to be a colonnaded courtyard approx 90 metres by 100 metres. The enclosure, however, is oriented north–south with the columned portico on the south – see Hoffmann 2001.
 - 20 Sartre 2001: 926.
 - 21 The number of Jews in Damascus was to grow in Roman times when they maintained several synagogues – Acts 9; 2; Acts 9.2; Jalabert 1920: 120; Corinthians 11.32; Schürer 1973 I: 130, III: 13; Josephus 1970: 2, 20, 2 (559–561); 7, 8, 7 (368). See also footnote 47 to Chapter 6.
 - 22 Green 1990: 547.
 - 23 Graf 1990: 51 argues it is not proven that they were still nomadic at the time of their first citation in the written record, Diodorus Siculus XIX 94–100, referring to events in 312 BC. Graf 1987: 18 on first epigraphic evidence (third century BC); Zouhdi 1976. Retsö's study of the issue overturns many old assumptions – Retsö 2003: 378–383.
 - 24 Schürer 1973 I: 36, 128. Kasher 1988: 30–31, 55 claims evidence (from the mid-second century BC) of a move by the Hasmonaeans, supported by the Nabataeans, to rescue the Jewish communities south of Seleucid Damascus who were under threat from the aggressive Hellenising practices of the Greeks.
 - 25 Kasher 1988: 96; Schürer 1973 I: Appendix 1; Taylor 2001: 51.
 - 26 Peters 1983: 273. Even in the Arab Middle Ages the quarter bore the name 'al-Naybatun'. Sack argues that the quarter was not necessarily grid-planned until two straight north–south streets were driven through it in the nineteenth century as part of the rebuilding after the 1860 massacres in the Christian quarter – Sack 1989a: 11, 77–80. Sartre 2001: 143 is sceptical about the location of the 'Nabataean Quarter'.
 - 27 Meshorer 1975: 12–16; Newell 1939: 92–94.
 - 28 Graf 1994: 22–23.

5

TOWARDS A PAX ROMANA (64 BC–AD 30)

Rome intervenes

Rome had been monitoring the Hellenistic kingdoms of Asia Minor and Syria for over a hundred years. Its strategy was to prevent any of the Hellenistic states from acquiring sufficient influence to challenge its position in the Mediterranean: a sort of Mediterranean version of the Monroe Doctrine. As already noted (page 53), the Treaty of Apamea in 188 BC had forced the Seleucids to renounce their designs on Asia Minor. Rome had subsequently felt the need on several occasions to reorder the balance between Ptolemies and Seleucids to prevent either emerging as a dominant force. In practice, the policy may have worked too well. Seleucid power was so diminished that the dynasty struggled to control even the original 'New Macedonia', the citadel of northern Syria. In this power vacuum, fresh problems opened up. Syria became the battleground of new forces beyond Rome's reach.

The Roman general, Pompey, became the first of the budding late Republican leaders to rise to prominence through campaigning in the east. Later to be hailed as a new Alexander, Pompey took to the field in 66 BC to address two major threats to the Roman presence in eastern Asia Minor: Mithridates, who had appropriated the Roman province of Pontus; and the Armenian King, Tigranes (who, as noted earlier, page 60 had taken Damascus in 72 BC). Under Pompey's settlement in Asia Minor, imposed even before battle could be joined, Mithridates was chased out of Pontus and Tigranes was forced to submit to Roman protection. It was a classic piece of Roman statecraft through the creative exploitation of balance. A Roman protectorate in Armenia avoided the need for any direct confrontation with the rising power to the east: the Parthians who had controlled the Iranian plateau since the third century BC and who had inherited the Achaemenids' ambitions in Syria. To make the balance work, however, the chaotic situation in Syria to the south

had to be settled as piracy and brigandage had begun to pose an endemic threat to regional stability and prosperity.

The one solution to the Syrian problem Pompey had been quick to exclude was the restoration of the Seleucid dynasty. The Greek house was now virtually defunct, its rule shakily confined to the immediate environs of 'New Macedonia'. Tigranes had all but eliminated the dynasty as he took over successive parts of Syria from 83 to 69 BC. His subsequent withdrawal to meet the Roman challenge to his homeland had created even worse chaos, delivering Syria to local princes and bandit groups. The last claimant to the Seleucid throne, Antiochus XIII, had been forced to seek the protection of the Arab prince of Emesa, Samsigeramus. Roman rule became the only alternative to continuing anarchy 'from Jewish and Arab brigands'.¹ Pompey sought to introduce just enough direct Roman rule to keep the local Syrian forces from destroying each other, thus preventing the Armenians or Parthians from filling the vacuum with their imperial ambitions.

Pompey's settlement

Pompey's takeover of Syria in 64 BC, 'arguably the greatest single conquest in Rome's history',² was a quick and decisive affair. The Seleucid kingdom now defunct, Pompey made minimal effort to tidy up the messy arrangement of city-states, Arab principalities and would-be kingdoms that confronted him on arrival. His remit from the Roman Senate, strictly speaking limited to the suppression of the revolt of Mithridates, had already been exceeded. He had no mandate to set up for Rome a tightly administered province in Syria.

Pompey had already interested himself in the affairs of Damascus, having sent two envoys, Lucius Lollius and Metellus Nepos, to take the city in 66 BC even while he was still engaged in Asia Minor.³ The fact that Damascus was occupied before all else underlines the importance of the city.⁴ Before marching south, Pompey sent ahead another envoy, his lieutenant, Aemilius Scaurus, to settle the main disputes between the rival groups. Scaurus arrived in Damascus to find the city evacuated three years earlier by Tigranes and blocked the Nabataeans from resuming control. Pompey followed south in 64 BC via the Orontes Valley where he suppressed the attempted resistance of a Jewish partisan, Lysias, hiding out in the Bargylus Mountains (Jebel al-Ansariye), refuge of a number of local tetrarchs. After presumably reaching an accommodation with Samsigeramus in Emesa (the prince who had given refuge to the Seleucid pretender), Pompey continued on to Damascus through the Beqa'a Valley and Ituraea.

On arrival in Damascus in 63 BC, Pompey found envoys from 'all Syria, and Egypt, and out of Judaea' anxious to learn what fate awaited their employers.⁵ Two rivals for the Hasmonaean throne of Judaea were obdurately unreconciled and Pompey was forced to besiege Jerusalem to drive out Aristobolus and install his rival, his brother Hyrcanus, as 'ethnarch' of Judaea, a lesser title than 'king'. Distracted by the Jerusalem episode from a campaign against Nabataea, Pompey went no further

to settle the perpetual squabbles of Syrian petty dynasts. Concentrating Roman rule on the areas controlled by the Greek cities, he left the rest of the troublesome Jews and Arabs to organise themselves for the moment. Almost immediately afterwards, in 62 BC, he was recalled to the north to deal with the consequences of the death of Mithridates and then proceeded in triumph to Rome.

As a result of Pompey's settlement, a province of Syria provided a basic framework to control the areas once administered by the Seleucids. Its chief centre remained the Seleucid metropolis of Antioch. The major city-states and the principalities of Emesa, Chalcis and Laodicea-ad-Libanum were left intact. Damascus, nominally a Seleucid city, benefited enormously in terms of prestige and economic role from Rome's intervention. Though now a self-governing city within Provincia Syria – the largest in southern Syria – it seems to have had a Roman prefect stationed there. It took perhaps ten years for the Roman administration to bring an end to the anarchy but the city, as a result, gained breathing space.



FIGURE 5.1 Pompey's settlement

The three great tribal kingdoms surrounding Damascus were invited to become Roman clients and their territorial ambitions were clipped. The sun-worshipping Ituraeans under the Hellenised Arab prince, Ptolemy, eagerly paid a thousand talents for the privilege and in the process lost much territory in present-day Lebanon, thus easing pressure on Damascus from the west. The Ituraeans were given new lands south of Damascus partly to serve as a check on the Nabataeans' northwards push and to tame the rivalry between the Nabataean and Hasmonaean kingdoms.⁶ Further south, the recognition in 48 BC of the Idumaeen Arab Antipater as *procurator* (civilian administrator) of Judaea would settle affairs temporarily in Palestine.

The third tribal principality, however, was a bit of unfinished business that was to dominate the city's agenda for another century and a half. Nabataea survived as the only independent entity recognised as a 'kingdom', partly because Pompey finally abandoned his plans for a campaign against Petra when he returned to Asia Minor. He had sent Scaurus on ahead to Petra but he had returned with only a vague assurance on the payment of tribute by the Nabataean kings.

Finally, to complete the stabilisation of the Damascus area, Pompey encouraged a loose alliance between the cities of the Decapolis wedged between Damascus, Ituraea and Judaea. Damascus may well have played a supervisory role, as the smaller cities had not developed strong civic institutions of their own in the Hellenistic period. This would account for the inclusion of Damascus on Pliny's list of the Decapolis.⁷ From the time of Augustus they formed an economic grouping whose access to the coast was probably via Caesarea. Rome reserved a right of intervention but the cities were still heavily influenced by Nabataea. Initially, the cities lacked the cohesion to control the countryside between them, particularly the area immediately south of Damascus where normal life remained threatened by multifarious problems ranging from Jewish partisans to endemic banditry.

Damascus was theoretically still a self-governing entity in Roman territory but in practice the arrangement was more complicated. Millar notes that 'Damascus and its surrounding oasis . . . was an enclave which Rome ruled in principle but where it seemed to have intervened only on occasion'.⁸ Damascus had a little more room to manoeuvre, enjoyed a good deal more prestige than before and now had a choice of corridors to the coast, to the south via the Decapolis, to the west to Berytus (Beirut) and via the traditional route to Tyre. Samsigeramus' influence in Emesa had spread eastwards to embrace an alliance with the rising economic power of Palmyra, the desert trading city whose control of the short cut across to the Euphrates was the key to much of the trading potential of Damascus. This patchwork was a messy but workable arrangement and one that locked Damascus in to the overall prosperity of the southern Syrian region.

The east Mediterranean theatre

Egypt was not strictly part of Pompey's grand design to buttress Roman interests but was drawn in by the growing rivalries of the pretenders to power in late Republican Rome. The eastern Mediterranean became the theatre where much

of their rivalry was played out. The Roman state was still, in theory, a republic but one increasingly manipulated by the superstars of the Roman army. The greatest of all was Julius Caesar who brought his army back into Italy after conquering Gaul in 49 BC. The senatorial party tried to block him, taking as its leader Pompey. Pompey and Caesar joined battle at Pharsalus in Greece in 48 BC. Pompey was defeated. Failing to find refuge in Syria, he fled to Egypt hoping to be given sanctuary by the Ptolemies. His hosts treacherously stabbed him to death as he set foot in Alexandria.

When Caesar arrived in Alexandria in pursuit of Pompey, the ruler, Ptolemy XIII, in a grotesque attempt to win Caesar's favour, delivered to him Pompey's head on a plate. Caesar found himself stranded in the Ptolemaic court, protected only by a small expeditionary force. Caesar backed the claim of Ptolemy's sister and rival for the throne, Cleopatra VII. Cleopatra's initial interview was stage managed by a Sicilian servant who delivered her to Antony furlled within a roll of bedding or a carpet. Cleopatra may not have been as ravishing as Shakespeare later immortalised her but Caesar was never one to refuse a dalliance. Ptolemy was defeated in battle and Cleopatra installed: her son, Ptolemy XIV, as nominal ruler. Caesar left in 47 BC for Pontus via Syria. Cleopatra subsequently sailed to Rome in pursuit of her new lover by whom she had already produced a son, Caesarion. Caesar, however, was assassinated in 44 BC just as he was about to depart to wage war against the Parthians who had taken advantage of the Romans' internecine troubles to revive their designs on Syria.

Cleopatra returned to Egypt where she was to continue her personal diplomacy with the next generation of Roman leaders. Mark Antony had been a key supporter of Caesar. Hoping to establish his claim to be Caesar's successor, he joined those opposed to Brutus and his fellow assassins. In the civil war that followed, the triumvirate of Antony, Octavian (now designated as Caesar's heir) and Lepidus divided the Roman Empire in an uneasy pact, the Peace of Brindisium in 40 BC. Antony (who had already served in Syria and Egypt in 58 to 57 BC) was allotted the eastern provinces. The Parthians had defeated a Roman triumvir, Crassus, at Carrhae in 53 BC and had by now overrun most of Syria as well as Palestine and parts of Asia Minor. The Syrians gave them an alarmingly warm welcome, weary of the apparent confusion of Rome's purpose. Antony took command in the east with a mandate to carry through Caesar's plans for the conquest of Parthia, perhaps even to use the campaign to recreate Alexander's empire in the east.

The previous year (41 BC) Antony had summoned Cleopatra to Tarsus in Cilicia to answer charges that she had financially supported Cassius, an opponent of the triumvirs' cause. At Tarsus, Antony proved, at least to Cleopatra, that he was a worthy successor to Caesar. Antony's encounter with Cleopatra in which 'she purs'd up his heart upon the River of Cydnus' is celebrated in one of Shakespeare's greatest pieces of evocative narration.⁹ His alliance with the Ptolemaic queen, sealed by marriage in 37 BC and the birth of twins, lasted a good decade until their deaths. It was not just the heady infatuation depicted by Shakespeare's source, the ancient historian Plutarch, as 'the final and crowning mischief';¹⁰ it was a clever

merger of political interests intended to make Antony's position in the eastern provinces unassailable.

Though Egypt was nominally still independent, Antony's alliance with Cleopatra mingled her affairs with Roman interests in Syria. Antony indulged Cleopatra by transferring to her much of Syria Coele, Nabataea and Phoenicia, as well as parts of Palestine; areas later signed over to their son, Ptolemy Philadelphus, under the so-called 'Donations of Alexandria' in 34 BC. The 'donations' bestowed on Cleopatra the domains that largely fulfilled her dream of restoring the Ptolemies' realms at their peak, including Damascus and Iturea but excluding Judaea. If effected, this would have lopped the southern reaches from the Roman province of Syria but it was probably never more than a gesture.¹¹ While Antony might claim he was continuing Pompey's policy of a network of alliances with less threatening local princes, the gesture, as seen back in Rome, revived the long-dormant aspirations of the Ptolemies and went much further than prudent statecraft could sanction. It provided an excuse to those opposed to Antony's interests to sound the alarm, questioning Antony's hold on reality. An eastern threat, not only to Roman territorial interests but to basic Roman values, was for the astute Octavian a foolproof device for manipulating popular opinion.

Damascus and the struggle for empire

Damascus had become a base for Antony and Cleopatra's eastern operation during Antony's campaign against the Parthians. Antony had already conducted a raid against Palmyra in 41 BC, signaling to the inhabitants that they should cease their efforts to play off Rome against Parthia but also seeking a convenient excuse to provide his army with booty. He arrived in the desert oasis to find that the traditionally nomadic Palmyrenes, still somewhat footloose, had fled eastwards taking all their possessions. In 40 BC, Antony had made his first concerted attempt to fend off the Parthians whose renewed push into Syria was facilitated by the Syrians' indignation at Antony's exactions. In 37 BC he mounted a new eastern campaign, with Cleopatra's active support, to counter the Parthians' occupation of most of Syria, but the campaign resulted in a disastrous Roman retreat in 36 BC and a setback to his reputation. By 33 BC Antony had partially recovered with a successful invasion of Armenia, thus for the moment stabilising Syria's northern flank and putting the Parthians in check.

The rivalry between Antony and Octavian moved inexorably towards open warfare. The prolonged conflict, interposed with episodes of the Parthian campaign, swirled around the region. Each of the eastern cities was expected to make its contribution to the protagonists in the form of money and men. Syrian contingents were required for all the main engagements including rowers for the galleys. (Antony alone had 500 ships at his disposal.) Moreover, as long as the huge rival armies were on Syrian territory, the 'host' cities were expected to feed them and satisfy their lust for booty. The penalty for lack of cooperation was to transport the population off to slavery or for the city to be trashed and fined.

Octavian's successful manipulation of Roman opinion depicted Antony as a depraved and deluded god-king softened by the wiles of an oriental temptress. In 33 BC, when Antony formalised his split with his wife, Octavia (the sister of Octavian), all restraints were removed. Octavian declared war on Cleopatra as Egyptian monarch. Antony stayed loyal to her cause and their forces joined in the naval-land engagements at Actium in Greece in 31 BC. Antony failed to hold his ships' line against the determined assault of Octavian's admiral, Agrippa. Prejudging the outcome, Cleopatra's vessels split from the main line of Antony's fleet; she sped towards Alexandria with Antony scurrying after in defeat.

Antony had virtually lost all fight. While he might once have hoped to retain the loyalty of the Syrian cities, he rapidly found that nothing could be taken for granted. After Actium, they adroitly repositioned themselves.¹² Octavian moved through Syria, including Damascus in 30 BC, and collected expressions of support, no doubt recognising that Antony's disarray and his flight towards Alexandria signalled a man whose fortunes had turned. Antony dallied for a year in Alexandria with Cleopatra, their 'last revels' enduring until Octavian arrived by land.¹³ The *Bellum Alexandrinum* was a brief affair. Defeated in battle, Antony died in Cleopatra's arms, a lingering death after a botched suicide. A Roman *imperator* could not order the death of a woman but Cleopatra followed her lover's example, an interview with Octavian having convinced her she had little choice. She rejected a role in Octavian's triumph in which, in Shakespeare's words, 'an Egyptian puppet shall be shown . . . mechanic slaves with greasy aprons, rules and hammers shall uplift us to the view'. Not for her a Roman propaganda stunt, parading her 'greatness in the posture of a whore'.¹⁴ She preferred death in the sting of an asp.

Octavian restored the *status quo ante* in the eastern provinces. There were no jibes now about oriental petty tyrants. Most were confirmed as Pompey had left them, while the 'donations' reverted to previous ownership. With the acquisition of Egypt, Syria was now buttressed to the north and south by extensive tracts of Roman territory. Only to the north-east, where Parthia remained powerful, was there a potential threat, but one which lay largely dormant during the long rule of Octavian stretching to AD 14. Octavian (raised to the status of emperor under the title 'Augustus') was not tempted by Antony's policy of expansion eastwards. The Augustan peace gave new impetus to Syria's economic development after centuries of disruption and fragmentation.

Damascus, returned to Roman control, recovered quickly after the successive wars of the past ten years. It still enjoyed the theoretical status of a Hellenised self-governing city within the Roman province of Syria and now embarked on an unparalleled era of prosperity. The vigour of this recovery owed much to the strength of the city's trade position, the energies of its entrepreneurs and the new confidence that a golden age was dawning after so much chaos. The trading cities of the coast became even more vigorous entrepôts.

The Roman province of Syria was now a reality but its form was still somewhat tentative. In effect, Rome had established a bridgehead, its direct administration confined to the Greek-settled cities the Seleucids had established in northern Syria.

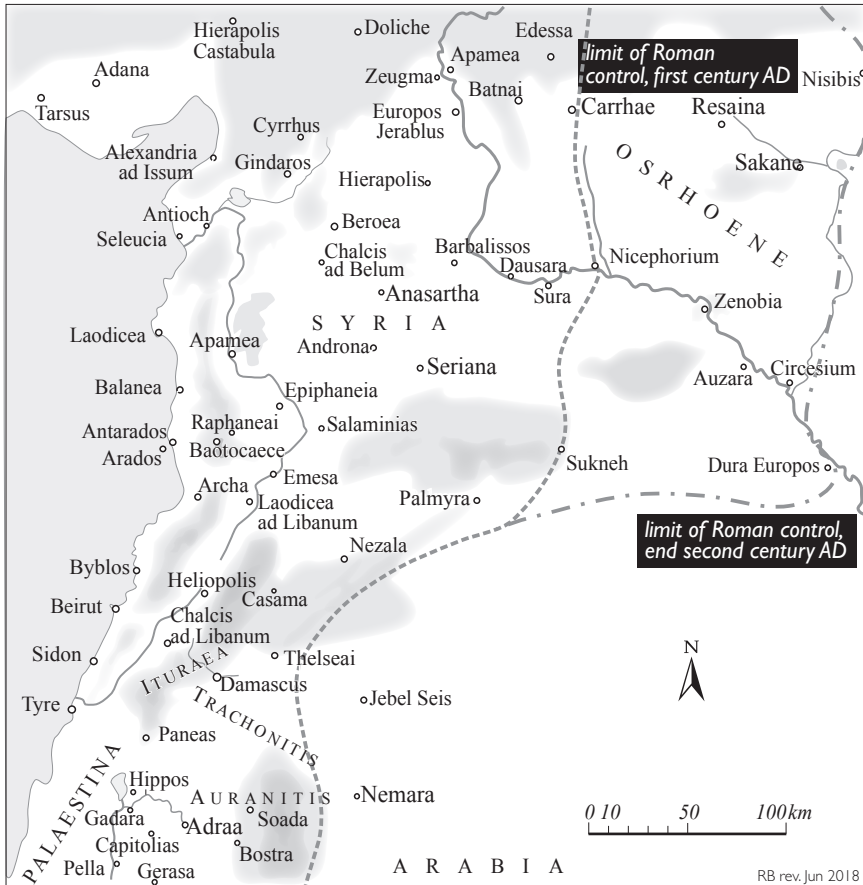


FIGURE 5.2 Roman Syria

Southern Syria remained a patchwork of administrations. There was no influx of new people and Syria remained a blend of Greeks, ‘Syrians’ (a loose term that largely seems to apply to the Aramaean base of the population) and other Semitic groups who had spilt over from the nomadic steppe, including Arab tribes. The last of these had moved into settled areas in previous centuries and attained local influence: the princely family at Emesa, the oligarchic rulers of Palmyra and the Nabataean Kingdom based on Petra.¹⁵ Rome was initially content to leave the control of frontier populations largely impervious to Greek influence in the hands of the native rulers, rather like the system the British followed in India with the princely states. Damascus remained a promontory surrounded by such rulers.

The broadly Hellenising trend resumed with renewed vigour under the Romans. Damascus found itself dealing with rulers very different in their approach from the disputatious Greeks. Rome had spent the past two centuries or more breeding a leadership caste in which ‘the values of the ruling aristocracy were

closely linked to military achievement'.¹⁶ Syria was a pivot of Roman power and the province was the most prestigious in the empire until it was partitioned in the late second century AD. The acquisition of western Asia Minor had already been a profitable experience for Rome. Egypt proved to be the step that locked in the imperial monopoly of the east's wealth. Pompey's decision to tap the trade that flowed through Syria usefully supplemented the Roman budget (not to mention Pompey's own purse). Not surprisingly, the appointment of a Syrian governor was a privilege the new emperor kept for himself.

Stabilising the Damascus region

While stability brought rapidly increasing prosperity, there were details to be sorted out in the immediate region of Damascus. South of Damascus, between the northernmost cities of the Decapolis league and the desert, lay the volcanic wilderness of Trachonitis (modern al-Leja). This difficult terrain strewn with lava rocks housed brigands preying on the more settled agricultural areas of Auranitis (Hauran) and on the slopes of the mountain to the south-east, today known as Jebel Hauran or Jebel al-Arab (Roman 'Asalmanos'). Augustus decided that the best solution was to give it to one of the local rulers to handle. In 23 BC he transferred the area to the Judaeian tetrarch, Herod 'the Great' (Antipater's son who had effectively taken the Jewish kingdom from the Hasmonaeian high priests).¹⁷ Herod had befriended Octavian since 30 BC, a fortuitous friendship that probably stemmed from genuine misgivings about Antony's attempts to restore the Ptolemaic empire. Augustus' move was determined not only out of friendship but as a practical measure to save Damascus from being cut off by a possible link between the Ituraeans and the brigands of Trachonitis.

The other dominant force south of Damascus was still the Kingdom of Nabataea whose territory extended north from Petra (southern Jordan) to take in the eastern Hauran. The relationship between Roman Damascus and the Nabataeans is still something of a historical puzzle since the city, as we have seen, was under heavy Nabataean influence well into the Roman period. The Nabataeans showed great talent in accommodating Roman influence, yet Rome was happy to see Herod tame their presence south of Damascus. Herod's security belt to the south and east of Damascus, now including the former Ituraean territories of Gaulanitis (Golan), relieved Rome of the need to deploy extensive forces in the south while it concentrated on its northern front versus Parthia.

In the early days of Syria's status as an imperial province, it had little in the way of a civilian administration. In Syria 'the Roman state *was* its military force' notes Millar and it was the commander of Roman forces who governed.¹⁸ A *legatus* of consular rank was assisted by a civilian *procurator* of equestrian rank who supervised financial affairs. Three (later four) Roman legions were initially stationed in Syria, each commanded by a *legatus* of praetorian rank.¹⁹ The overwhelming weight of this Roman presence, however, was in the north, with the legions distributed between Antioch, Cyrrhus, Laodicea (Latakia) and Zeugma with a fourth at Raphaneai in the Orontes Valley, west of Homs.

Though Damascus probably was an assize centre, a regular stop on the governor's circuit, there is no evidence of a major military presence in the Damascus area. An auxiliary unit was probably raised locally, part of the 20,000-strong *auxilia* in Syria during the Julio-Claudian period. The fact, however, that imperial legions were not stationed in the environs²⁰ reflected the overall level of stability in southern Syria as well as the fact that there was initially no 'colonial' presence that demanded close protection. There is some evidence, however, that Roman forces could be deployed to meet threats to public order. There was, for example, still a need to campaign against the Ituraeans in the Lebanon mountain in the late stages of Augustus' rule given the perpetual difficulties with bandits who took refuge in the wilderness areas south and east of Damascus. On the whole, however, the south was gradually pacified, clearing the way for previously nomadic people to settle, thus intensifying the development of agriculture and trade.

Rome under Augustus stimulated Palmyra's role as an entrepôt between east and west. Roman control by AD 19 apparently in no way inhibited the expansion of trade with the Persian Gulf. By the next century, the trade was booming with Palmyrene merchants establishing their own presence in the Gulf. The upsurge in trade was already considerable in Augustus' time and the lavish building program in Palmyra began quite early in the Augustan period. The introduction of Roman-trained craftsmen working to metropolitan pattern books provided the expertise behind the city's huge new prestige projects including the great Temple of Bel. Strabo also notes that good government and security under the Romans opened up the trade from Arabia Felix.²¹

The establishment of a Roman colony at Berytus, modern Beirut, in 15 BC was one of the rare colonial initiatives taken by Rome in the eastern provinces outside Asia Minor.²² A sub-colony was quickly founded at the cult centre traditionally devoted to the Ituraeans' cult of the sun – Heliopolis (Ba'albek) in the Beqa'a Valley. This colonial presence (reinforced by the later development of Berytus as a centre for the study of Roman law) was to shape Lebanon's identity even to this day, while consolidating Rome's access to Damascus and helping to hem in the troublesome Ituraeans.

Urge to monumentalise

It was not just in Palmyra that the first century AD brought a program of major projects profiting from the stability that Roman rule introduced. The beginning of Roman administration in Syria had already resulted in an early spate of civic building projects in Antioch. During a nine-day visit to the Syrian capital in 47 BC, Julius Caesar had ordered the building of several major amenities including a basilica, a theatre, an amphitheatre and the city's first aqueduct and public baths. As Roman rule in Syria brought an end to the decades of disintegration, civil war and external threat, an extraordinary building boom developed, focusing particularly on urban cult centres.

The Emperor Augustus had been keen to make his mark on the eastern cities, establishing them as beacons of Roman civilisation. He knew Syria from his visits before and after the Battle of Actium. He continued his predecessor's program of major works which further endowed Antioch with the appurtenances of a great city.²³ The craze for monumental building programs rapidly spread even to the client Nabataean kingdom as can be seen, for example, in the remarkable remains of Petra. The Palestinian tetrarch, Herod made a special point of expressing his gratitude for Augustus' patronage by embarking on a huge program of buildings to underline his association with the Roman *imperium*. Herod's gestures were not confined to his own territory. Damascus, which had given him refuge in 43 BC after the murder of his father, was to benefit from his program. Herod's choice of projects for Damascus, a theatre and a gymnasium, signalled his interest in Hellenism, possibly reinforced by his Damascus-born secretary, Nicolaus.²⁴

It seems likely that by Augustus' time, the grid plan of Greek Damascus had filled out, embracing to the east the Nabataean quarter. On the western edge, the city extended to a new civic quarter along the western end of Straight Street that now comprises the Suq Midhat Pasha. We have concrete evidence of a theatre immediately west of the Khan Suleiman Pasha (see below) and it seems likely that this previously vacant zone housed a gymnasium as well as a new odeon. The city now probably stretched to cover approximately the area of the walled city seen today, allowing for some realignment in the Arab Middle Ages. According to later Arab sources, the Roman city had seven gates named after

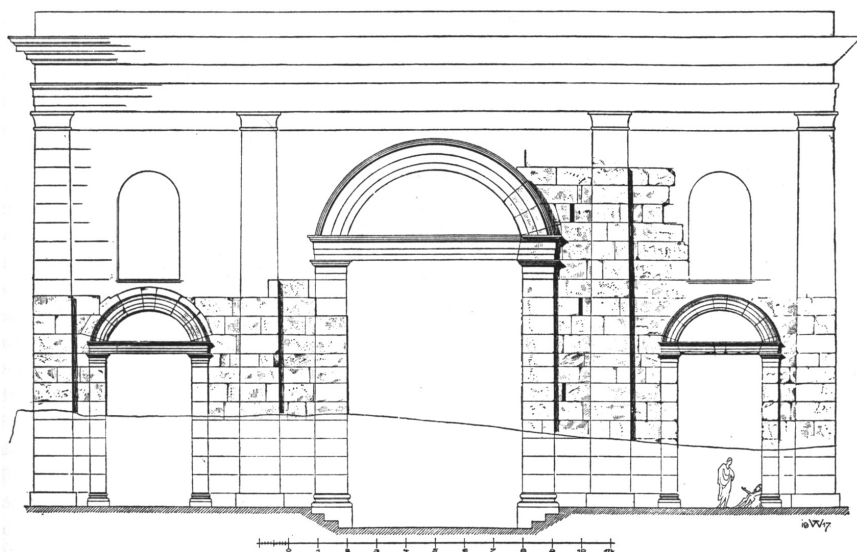


FIGURE 5.3 Bab Sharqi, east façade

Source: Watzinger and Wulzinger 1921: Abb. 45

the main heavenly bodies. Although we have no direct proof that this was the Roman practice, it seems consistent with that of other eastern cities (e.g. the Gate of the Sun in Alexandria) and the role of the Damascene protective deity, Jupiter-Hadad, as lord of the heavens.²⁵

The persistently straggling line of Straight Street was partly tamed to form one of the monumental colonnaded axes which were to become an essential element of the eastern cities of the empire. We have no exact date for the development of this *decumanus maximus*. It may have been initiated quite early as the gate at its eastern end (nowadays called Bab Sharqi) has been dated on stylistic ground to the first years of our era.²⁶ The grand façade of the eastern gate was reconstructed in the 1960s and is the city's most intact monument of the Roman era as well as its earliest surviving building.²⁷ Reputedly the Gate of the Sun of the Roman city, it was erected in the metropolitan style of the early empire; sober and unadorned, the only relief provided by the tall pilasters. Built for prestige, it had little defensive purposes, though it was probably flanked by towers on each side.

If the first century AD dating is correct, the arch marked the beginning of work on one of the first great monumental axes in the Roman world.²⁸ The gate heralds the *decumanus*' basic configuration – a grand avenue 26 metres wide comprising a 14 metre central carriageway for wheeled vehicles, flanked by arcaded pedestrian pavements and shops. The format was to become a common one in the Roman east and one of the first efforts to depict a typical colonnaded axis is shown in an early study of Bosra (see Figure 5.4). This became the new artery of the city. It echoed in its alignment the shorter axis of the Greek era that had joined the *agora* to the temple. Remains of the columns marking the initial section of the cross-city colonnade survive just inside the gate but the rest of the grand thoroughfare's columns disappeared, some only in the past century. In urgent work to replace storm-water pipes under Straight Street in 2008–2009, numerous large column drums and capitals were exposed during the excavations, enough to signal the grand dimensions of the colonnading project. Many segments were later repositioned along the new pedestrian sidewalks.²⁹

These great colonnaded axes were an idea of local eastern inspiration, combining prestige with the practical purpose of protecting shoppers and vendors from the sun. Given its straggling origins, it is no surprise that the *decumanus* needed to negotiate the occasional slight bend in its course across the city.³⁰ The deflections were disguised by monumental structures, one of which lies just to the west of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate along the street's central course. Dug out and reconstructed at ground level during the French Mandate, the remains of an arch lie in a small reserve. What survives is a small part of the eastern façade of an elaborate *tetrapylon*, more correctly, a *quadrifons*. Such four-way arched buildings were common in the Roman east and were possibly influenced by Achaemenid architecture.³¹ The surviving arch spanned only the northern pedestrian thoroughfare; the central vehicular passage is hinted at by the footings of a considerably larger arch, while the southern pedestrian passage has been overbuilt. This array would originally have been repeated facing the other three cardinal directions.

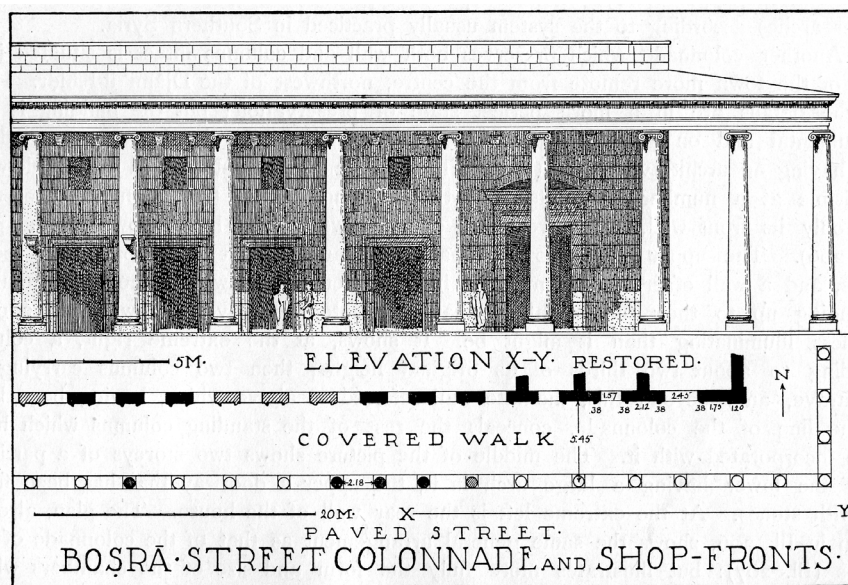


FIGURE 5.4 Bosra colonnade

Source: Butler 1919: ill. 20

Approximately 400 metres to the west (two intersections before the Suq al-Bazuriye), the second change of direction was marked by another monumental device whose vestiges are harder to detect. The isolated minaret, the Ma'danat al-Shahm (1368–1369), whose striking banded square form rises south of Straight Street, is poised on a plinth whose regular masonry and mouldings indicate Roman origin. This hints at a massive structure, probably a cluster of four plinths each bearing four columns – a *tetraklionion* comparable to those still seen at Jerash or Palmyra and possibly dating from the late second century. Later Arab sources speak of a single column bearing a statue at this point, perhaps also indicating that a commemorative column stood in the centre of the intersection.³² It is not impossible that this intersection formed a round plaza, a common device in the east. Though these monumental flourishes within the city represent later embellishments of the Augustan *decumanus*, they continue the scale of the project as first conceived. Built even before its counterpart in Antioch, this avenue is another illustration of the privileged position Damascus held in the eyes of the first emperor. Ernest Will has reminded us that in 20 BC Augustus visited the eastern provinces to recover the standards lost to the Parthians by Crassus in 53 BC at Carrhae.³³ It might well have been Augustus' personal initiative that contributed to the reinvigation of Damascus in order to make manifest Rome's new status in the region.

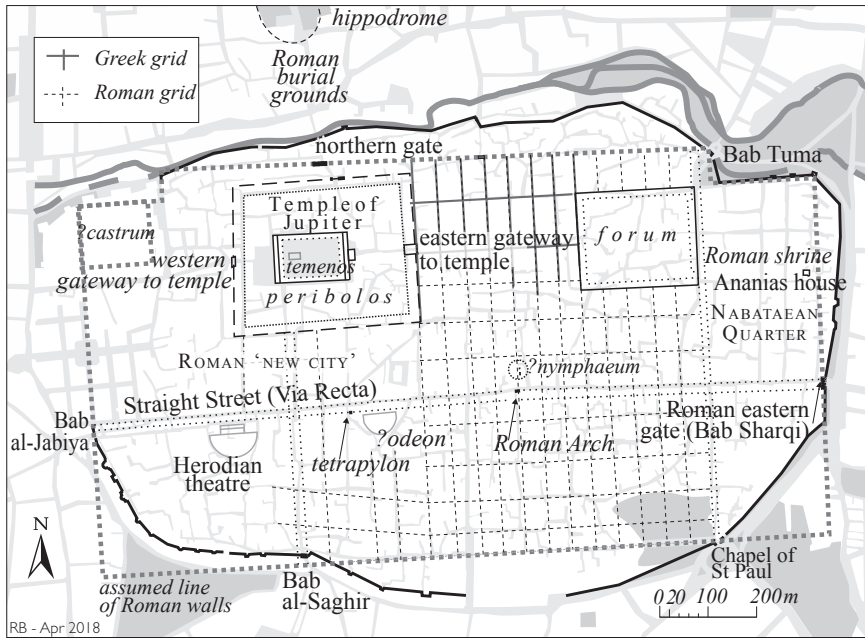


FIGURE 5.5 Roman Damascus

Civic works

For the first time, we have reached a point where physical remains survive as part of the contemporary city. Herod's theatre, cited by Josephus,³⁴ has long been an elusive element. If you look closely at the city's street plan you will see a point just below Suq Midhat Pasha where the street pattern departs from its basic grid to embrace an almost complete semicircle. For several generations scholars speculated that this encompassed the theatre endowed by Herod. Recent restoration work on an Ottoman house, Beit 'Aqqad (formerly the Danish Institute), uncovered a stretch of Roman wall on the north-eastern side of the courtyard. The configuration of the wall reveals that it is part of the *scaenae frons* of the stage structure, confirming the theatre's location exactly as surmised.³⁵ The building, before its conversion to an Ottoman town house, had served as a Mamluk palace. Before that a prison was installed in what remained of the theatre's sub-structure that had been exploited as a quarry. The diameter of the theatre must have been approximately 93 metres, comparable to the theatre in Palmyra that had an intended capacity of around 7,000 to 9,000 spectators. North of this recreational zone the theatre was probably linked by a short north-south route to the Jupiter Temple.³⁶ The Roman administrative headquarters was also most likely located in the area long associated with the palaces of the rulers of Damascus. A military compound

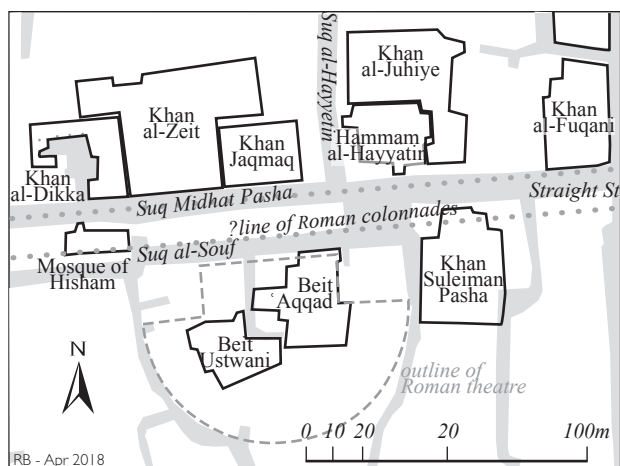


FIGURE 5.6 Location of Roman theatre

or *castrum* probably stood in the north-west corner now occupied by the Citadel (see page 56). The Greek hippodrome north of the Barada was retained under the Romans and nearby were other facilities including burial grounds today covered by the expanding city.³⁷

The improvements to the water supply are a little more visible. In the area immediately west of the walled city is a district still called ‘Qanawat’, Arabic for ‘aqueduct’. Remains of a Roman aqueduct are to be seen running along the side of one of the narrow streets long ago incorporated into the houses and alleys (see Map 4). There is no evidence that any system for piping water for domestic use existed before this Roman project that drew its flow from the Barada, downstream from the offtake of the Tora canal. The canal ran partly underground to traverse the ridge south of the Barada as far as the present Hijaz Station where, to maintain height, it ran above ground before continuing under the city at the entrance to Straight Street. A second channel fed the northern parts of the city, probably improving on an earlier stream introduced to serve the Aramaean-Greek temple compound.

Notes

- 1 Dobias 1931: 250.
- 2 Ball 2016: 4.
- 3 Dobias 1931: 241 n.2, 246.
- 4 Pliny *Natural History* V 18/74 (written mid-first century AD) considers Damascus the most important city of the southern Syrian region.
- 5 Josephus 1999: 14, 3, 1 (457).
- 6 Kasher 1988: 115–116.
- 7 Pliny *Natural History* V 18/74. It is difficult to establish a definitive list but the league included Scythopolis, Pella, Dium, Gadara, Hippos, Canatha (Qanawat), Philadelphia

('Amman), Gerasa (Jerash), and, probably, Abila and Capitolias. All these cities lie in what is now north-western Jordan and the south-western corner of Syria except Scythopolis which is west of the Jordan. Damascus is assumed by George Adam Smith *Historical Geography of the Holy Land* 1897 (reprinted 1968) to have been among the founding ten, though perhaps in an 'honorary' capacity.

- 8 Millar 1993: 38.
- 9 Shakespeare *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra* Act II, Scene 2. The River Cydnus flows into the Mediterranean at Tarsus on Turkey's Cilician coast.
- 10 Plutarch *Mark Antony* 25, Ian Scott-Kilvert (trans.) 1965: 292.
- 11 Coins honouring Cleopatra were struck in Damascus in 36, 35 and 32 BC – de Saulcy 1874: 33; Jalabert 1920: 120.
- 12 Retsö 2003: 399.
- 13 Syme 1963: 298.
- 14 Shakespeare *Antony and Cleopatra* Act V, Scene 2.
- 15 For a recent survey – Retsö 2003.
- 16 Green 1990: 658.
- 17 Roller 1998: 31, 157.
- 18 Millar 1993: 33.
- 19 Millar 1993: 32.
- 20 There is no reference to any deployments of legionary detachments until the mid-third century – Pollard 2000: 42.
- 21 Strabo *Geography* 16, 2, 20 1930: 265.
- 22 Others were at Ptolemais and Caesarea Maritima in Palestine.
- 23 Downey 1961: 169–79.
- 24 Josephus 1970: 1, 21, 11 (422); Roller 1998: 224–225.
- 25 Watzinger and Wulzinger 1921: 62.
- 26 Freyberger 1989: 86; 1999: 127–128. In her comparative survey seeking to date the 'Ecce Homo' arch in Jerusalem, Arnould regards Freyberger's date as a working hypothesis only – Arnould 1997: 122, 136, 286. Will 1994: 40 accepts an early imperial date. The issue is discussed in Burns 2017: 157–162.
- 27 Mufti 1966.
- 28 Will 1994: 40.
- 29 In 1924, the British frequent visitor, Rev. Hanauer, noted that the columns along the western stretch of the *decumanus* were still visible – Hanauer 1924: 68. The fact that the capitals that survive on columns reused in the Khan al-Dikka at the western end of the *decumanus* are identical to those on the inner face of Bab Sharqi would seem to indicate that the upgrade was completed as a single project. Watzinger and Wulzinger 1921: 46 assumed that they were on the alignment of the *decumanus*, a view corrected in Wulzinger and Watzinger 1924: 80.
The role of the Damascus colonnaded axis as a possible early development of the device in Roman town planning is examined in Burns 2017: 150–162
- 30 The deviation amounts to around five degrees along the total length of the street – Wulzinger and Watzinger 1921: 47.
- 31 Ball 2016: 329.
- 32 We will also see later that this was considered the point at which the two Arab armies that took Damascus met, converging from the eastern and western gates.
- 33 Will 1994: 11, 42.
- 34 Josephus 1970: 1, 422.
- 35 Mortensen 2002: 236–239.
- 36 Freyberger in Mortensen 2005: 181–202.
- 37 Toueir 1970 on the tombs.

6

METROPOLIS ROMANA (30–268)

Who were the Syrians?

There was no major change in the Syrian population base in the early Roman period. The Greek or Hellenised elite remained the upper stratum. Others, however, could become eligible for Roman citizenship. Some recent studies have assumed nascent tensions between the Greek-Roman or assimilated ruling classes and the Semitic base population. There is also a trend to identify a form of Arab nationalism 1,900 years before the event. While such tensions probably did exist, the study by Fergus Millar on *The Roman Near East, 31 BC to AD 337*¹ shows a fairly consistent pattern of a largely Aramaean population submitting itself to a gradual process of Hellenisation. The process, however, had its limits and it is worth noting that no Syrians from the local aristocracy held political office in Rome for a long time; no senators until the Flavian period, for example. Those major figures who eventually gravitated to Rome in the second century AD were descendants of the deposed Semitic princes. A recent writer has warned ‘we must beware of assuming that the emphasis on ethnicity as a primary form of self-identification that we see in modern contexts was equally important in the Roman Empire’.² Equally it would be foolish to assume that a ‘multicultural’ paradise prevailed. There was certainly a process of ‘mutual enrichment of cultures’ of which the Hellenic tradition was one among many rather than a ruthless drive towards integration. In areas adjacent to the steppe, groups such as the Nabataeans or the Palmyrenes retained their own languages and scripts. The medium of administration and of civic life, however, was fundamentally Greek which, even if not the first language of the majority, was accessible to them.

While there may have been few real attributes of the political life of a Greek *demos* (such as an assembly, the wide dissemination of laws) a citizen of Damascus could espouse a profoundly Hellenised culture, as we can see from the career

of Nicolaus of Damascus. Born in the city in 64 BC, his career has been seen by his recent biographer as 'a symbol of the new generation under Roman power, able to encompass easily both east and west'.³ It is not clear if his parents were Greek but he studied in Alexandria and took all the classic subjects. He entered the service of Cleopatra, probably as tutor to her children, and after 30 BC made the transition to Herod's court. Herod became Augustus' 'chief client among the eastern princes'⁴ and encouraged his resident intellectual to write a hopefully flattering biography of his great patron. Nicolaus moved to Rome to undertake the task and stayed on both as resident lobbyist for Herod and, after his master's death in 4 BC, as a successful historian. What is most interesting about his career path, though, is not simply the ease with which a Greek educated person could move between the worlds of Damascus, Alexandria, Jerusalem and Rome but the fact that he became a role model in his native city, his memory still cherished until the seventh century.

If the broad divisions between Greeks, 'Syrians' and Arabs were normally fudged by the Hellenising process, the situation was markedly different in the Judaeen kingdom to the south where Herod ultimately failed to bridge the gulf between Jews and Romans. The Romans, conscious of the difficulties the Greeks had experienced, had sought to treat Judaea as a special case by ruling through Herod, backed by second order Roman military units (not a full legion). The fact that we have vastly more evidence in the writings of a detailed though often tendentious source, Josephus, has perhaps skewed the exposure given to the affairs of this small corner of the Syrian region. The problems of Judaea were not totally untypical of the Semitic world but they were given a harder edge by the clarity of monotheistic Judaism and by the detailed historical record on which the Jews could draw. Other Semitic traditions, less prescribed and regulated than Judaism, could more easily see their gods loosely assimilated to the Graeco-Roman pantheon.⁵

The attempt at a partly 'hands off' approach in the early imperial period was abandoned after the first major Jewish revolt against Roman rule in Judaea in AD 66. This eruption had no parallel in the province of Syria. The affairs of a minor principality in a far corner of the empire were to require one seventh of Rome's entire military strength to bring the situation under control.⁶ The bloody events that followed reflected Rome's determination not to let the situation in the east unravel. Too complex to describe in detail here, we should not forget, though, that the confrontation was not confined to Palestine. Certainly it had terrible consequences in Damascus where Jews formed a significant minority. Josephus describes the slaughter of the Jewish community by the men of Damascus eager to revenge the loss of life among the Romans in Jerusalem. The Damascus Jews were herded into a sports venue (almost certainly Herod's gymnasium, that potent symbol of the Hellenic lifestyle which also served as a place of justice). There they were slaughtered secretly to prevent the wives of Damascus ('almost all of them addicted to the Jewish religion') intervening to plead against the carnage. Josephus prosaically notes that 'though (the Jews) numbered 10,500, they slaughtered them all in one hour without any trouble'.⁷

The Roman age of innocence was over. The revolt of a whole subject people brought an end to the soft option of reliance on petty kingdoms. Direct administration was extended to more of Syria. Around the time of the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans, Emesa may have been integrated through the abolition of the Samsigeramus dynasty.⁸ A more direct form of Roman rule had already been established in Palmyra where the local oligarchs were happy to mimic the attributes of Romans while preserving the core of their Semitic traditions. In the late first century AD, Nabataean local ambitions, especially under King Rabel II (r.71–106), expanded their trading interests in the Decapolis, making the Roman overlords somewhat uneasy. Impressed by the Nabataeans' runaway commercial success, in 106 Rome abolished the kingdom and created in its place Provincia Arabia. Significantly, its capital was moved to Bostra (modern Bosra), considerably closer to the local pole of Roman influence at Damascus than the inaccessible fastness of Petra in southern Jordan.

The city and temple of Jupiter

Damascus was now at a high point of its prosperity and prestige, flourishing as a faithful client of Rome. That urban status it only fitfully earned in the Greek period was no longer elusive. The city had long ceased to be a frontier town in a lost corner of an empire. It was firmly administered; its environs had been largely secured from banditry and raids by petty princes. Prolonged prosperity was supported by the city's fertile agricultural base. Peace meant wealth flowed along the trade routes to the east and south as Roman demand grew for exotic luxury items the east could provide to satisfy Rome's increasingly eclectic tastes. This burgeoning trade enabled the city to contemplate new ventures in civic embellishment and to further the prestige of the cult that had long enhanced its status.

While Damascus was by no means in the top rank of cities of the eastern empire, coming a good way behind Antioch and Alexandria in population, it was in the lower ranks of the second tier coming after Jerusalem, Apamea or Tyre. It was, however, a major centre in terms of the prestige that the Romans sought to promote the advantages of their rule. Strabo, noting that Damascus had been 'the most illustrious city of the region for the Persians' believed it still enjoyed major status in his day (the Augustan era).⁹ It was one of the first cities to make an enthusiastic effort to implant a Roman-Greek sense of order in physical form. The asset that put it in the 'worth the trip' category, however, was the importance of its cult which in literary sources often rivalled nearby Jerusalem in terms of power to draw people to its temple. The temple compound had occupied a sizeable proportion of the Greek city. Roman Damascus, however, planned on an even bigger scale and the temple became the magnet that regularly drew immense crowds to its festivals. Updating a tradition going back a millennium to Aramaean times, the sky god Hadad-Ramman took the form of *Jupiter optimus maximus Damascenus*. Damascus enjoyed wide fame as the city of Jupiter, a phenomenon that sprouted satellite centres as far away as Italy. The temple quickly became a beacon of the new assimilationist order.

Who might have inspired and guided the new project is largely a mystery but it must have reflected close interplay between the high priest of the temple and the civic authorities. Inscriptions indicate that the project was funded by contributions to the temple treasury solicited from the local business elite by the priests and temple guardians,¹⁰ with the active encouragement of the Roman administration. The extent of Roman involvement is shown by inscriptions indicating that by the second century many temple priests and treasury officials carried largely Greek or Roman names, while the individual donors more commonly carried names of Semitic origin.¹¹ Rostovtzeff has suggested that Damascus, along with Emesa, Palmyra and Edessa, 'remained what they had been, the residences of priest-kings: they never became Greek cities like Antioch'.¹² This may be overstating the case but the huge scale of the temple compound indeed suggests that the religious hierarchy, with the support of the Roman administration, had a large say in urban affairs.

We know from recent research¹³ that the Greek temple was reconfigured at the beginning of the first century AD, towards the end of the long reign of Augustus, when Christ was still a youth. This is when work began on the system of two concentric rectangular courts. The inner *temenos* was probably not completed until shortly after the end of Augustus' reign (AD 14), the date for the end of work on the north-west tower. The outer compound or *peribolos* with its associated market may not have been completed until the middle of the first century AD as an inscription implies that it was built in stages as funds were raised,¹⁴ possibly through its commercial activities. The eastern outer gateway or *propylaeum* was not added until that date.¹⁵ Additional altars, banquet rooms and shrines, remains of which have been found in the outer compound, were separately funded by individuals. Embellishments in a more flamboyant style were probably added in a further major upgrading towards the end of the second century, during the reign of Septimius Severus.

Before looking at the full development of the Jupiter compound, it is instructive to see how the shape of the temple emerged from the work of researchers over the past hundred years, for their deductions give much insight into what can be read into the remains that survive in the Umayyad Mosque and its surroundings. The first glimpse that European readers had of the temple compound was first published in London in 1745 in Richard Pococke's *Description of the East*.¹⁶ Pococke was an Oxford graduate, a clergyman who became a passionate traveller, one of the first true exponents of the informed 'travel writer' tradition. He travelled extensively in Syria and published three volumes of his accounts full of topographical or historical detail, venturing beyond a confection of legends and folk tales. His illustration of the plan of the Mosque was the first application of an inquiring mind to the remains visible to the naked eye.¹⁷ The layout he plotted sought to explain the still considerable number of columns left outside the *temenos*, traces of colonnades and arcades of the outer enclosure that have since disappeared. In Pococke's view, the Byzantine church survived as the prayer hall of the Mosque and had been surrounded by five colonnaded buildings on which he conferred fanciful descriptions.

This assumption that the church had been converted directly into a mosque was a false lead that took another two centuries to correct.

As Damascus became more open to western visitors towards the end of the nineteenth century, curiosity increasingly focused on the Roman temple remains. (Non-Muslim visitors were first admitted to the Mosque in 1860.¹⁸) Keen-eyed travellers spotted columns or gateways still surviving between the more fragile houses of Ottoman Damascus. The assiduous Irish missionary, Josias Porter, in his *Five Years in Damascus* (1855) made the first attempt at a strictly factual plan and described no less than 40 surviving columns or column fragments lying north and east of the Mosque.¹⁹ One of the first true experts, Archibald Campbell Dickie, was assigned by the Palestine Exploration Fund in 1896 to report his deductions on the Roman temple, partly reflecting interest in the fate of the Mosque after the great fire of 1893.²⁰ One of the most complete examinations was an article in the journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects by R. Phené Spiers who had visited Damascus in 1868 and made detailed drawings.

The assiduous research and keen knowledge of the city applied by J. E. Hanauer, however, produced the first breakthrough in relating the temple to the broader plan of the classical city. In articles prepared for the *Palestine Exploration Fund*

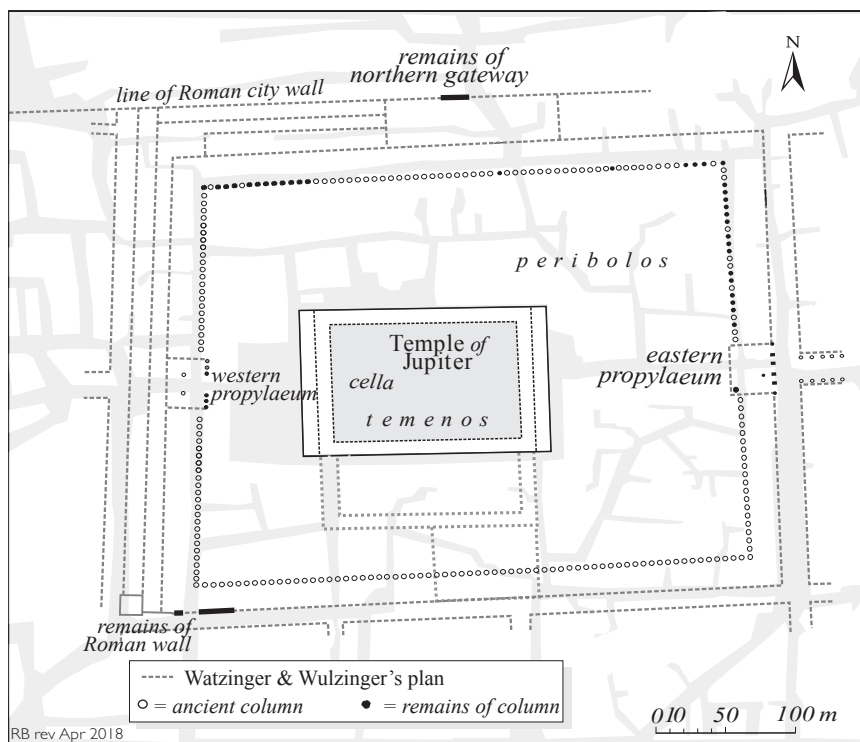


FIGURE 6.1 Remains of the Temple of Jupiter *peribolos*

Quarterly in 1911–1912, he observed at regular intervals along the street that led up to the eastern gate of the temple remains of what had once been an impressive colonnade (see Figure 4.2).²¹ To the north of the half-buried eastern outer gate he noted too a fragment of the eastern wall and the inner colonnade of the *peribolos*, at that time smothered by encroaching houses. These clues led him accurately to reconstruct the shape of the temple outer compound and its grand processional avenue leading from the east.

These new studies culminated in the researches of a German team, Wulzinger and Watzinger, commissioned by the Turkish administration in 1915 to record the ancient and Arab remains of the city. The German researchers, whose work we have already noted in relation to the Greek city, looked further into the evidence of the *peribolos*. Their reconstruction (Figure 6.1) confirmed the picture of a vast space surrounding the *temenos*, though on some details they were lured into flights of fancy on rather flimsy evidence. More rigorous sifting was conducted between the wars by the French researchers, René Dussaud and Jean Sauvaget, but all previous studies have now been superseded by the authoritative examination of the building's structure by Talal Akili.²²

It is difficult from today's perspective to grasp how such huge expenditure could be diverted to cult centres. We have seen in the previous chapter that in southern Syria and Judaea, the early imperial urge to monumentalise was stimulated partly by the building program of Herod the Great (d.4 BC). Most spectacular of Herod's projects was the plan (begun in 20 BC) to rebuild the great temple at Jerusalem on monumental lines. (The sheer scale and the challenge of the site brought its own problems and the temple was still unfinished in the time of Herod's grandchildren.) The destruction of the Jerusalem temple not long after its completion was to raise it to the status of a *cause célèbre* for the next two millennia; by contrast the Damascus temple was, at least in part, to survive.

Like the Jerusalem complex, the Damascus temple demanded an enormous outlay of time and resources but it was an era when such projects intended to draw the maximum number of visitors were the norm. Prosperity and security encouraged people to travel far and wide to the cult centres, promoting the old Aramaean-Phoenician deities in their new guises. Nevertheless, the huge scale of the temples in both Damascus and Jerusalem in relation to the size of the urban population is remarkable. The Damascus temple compound including the *peribolos* measured over 117,000 square metres. That is less than 20 per cent smaller than the platform of the great temple at Jerusalem (140,000 square metres), usually considered to be the largest single-temple complex in the ancient world. While visitors can still appreciate the extent of the Jerusalem esplanade, the outer dimensions of the Damascus *peribolos* were later swallowed by the redevelopment of the city in the Byzantine and Arab periods. It was the great age of city cults: Helios (Ba'albek and Emesa), Melqart (Tyre), Ba'al (Byblos), Atargatis (Menbij), Ba'al-Shamin (Si'a). We are still only groping towards an appreciation of how important religious pilgrimage was in the Roman east. The picture we have is of a proliferation of such centres in many parts of Syria, often building on the preclassical tradition of worship on 'high places'.

The Temple of Jupiter outstripped in scale anything the Romans built in their own capital before the major public works of the late imperial period. It probably likewise outclassed any of the major religious buildings of the original *metropolis* ('mother city') of the Syrian province, Antioch. Unfortunately, this assertion cannot be defended in detail since most of Roman Antioch has been lost to us. The changes in the Orontes' course, exacerbated by the effects of earthquakes over the past 2,000 years, have robbed us of physical evidence of Roman Antioch beyond some sketchy indication of its street layout. Alexandria, the second major imperial city of the east, has preserved few of its Roman remains. It is thus left to the second order provincial cities like Damascus, Apamea, 'Amman or Palmyra to show the grand scale on which they conceived their status under Rome's aegis.

Importance of cult centres

Drawing heavily on the canon of Roman architectural decoration, major cult centre developments were undertaken in places as remote as Palmyra and Petra, only loosely controlled by Rome and indeed even in areas outside their control such as Hatra in Mesopotamia. Much research still needs to be done on the process that brought such an extraordinary amalgam between Semitic religious forms and the 'Roman' (basically Hellenistic) architectural canon.²³ Certainly the shapes of the temple compounds and the uses to which they were put reflect the Semitic tradition. The clan leaders or high priests (they were often the same) who commissioned the projects and raised contributions from wealthy citizens sought to maximise their impact by adorning them with all the appurtenances of the latest Roman architectural 'look'. Some cult centres sought to enhance their prestige by drawing as many divine personalities as possible into the one cult of a 'god of heaven', perhaps an answer to nearby Jerusalem and its insistence on monotheism. Divine worlds were not rigidly compartmentalised and the Semitic, Mesopotamian and Greek-Roman firmaments mingled easily. All the gods associated with the heavens – Hadad, Ba'al-Shamin, Dushara, Dionysus-Dusares, the later cult of *Sol Invictus* and even the local tradition of the 'nameless god' – were thus transformed into the 'supreme heavenly-astral Zeus'.

The expression of civic self-confidence through projects emphasising grandeur, order and symmetry can still be glimpsed by a visitor nearing the site of the Damascus temple along the western approach, the Suq al-Hamidiye, today a major shopping precinct. Suddenly amid the hubbub of the bazaar you spot the crippled but still magnificent harmony of the *propylaeum* that marked the western entrance to the temple *peribolos* (Figure 6.5). The intricacy and richness of its Corinthian columns, probably going back to Septimius Severus' late second century refurbishment, rise in triumphant symmetry above the stalls proclaiming that this is a trading city not daunted by time. Passing the smaller columns that once supported a covered entrance hall of the Byzantine period, more of the imposing scale of the temple compound becomes visible. Across the area cleared in the 1980s to free the Umayyad Mosque of commercial accretions, the wall of the inner compound

(*temenos*) of the temple confronts with a blankness that impresses by its relentless repetition of a few elements – huge limestone blocks broken by 18 thin pilasters every five metres capped by severely simple capitals in the Egyptian style popular in the first century AD. The recently restored merlons remind you that this is an eastern project only partly reflecting Roman codes.

The major entrance to the Umayyad Mosque for today's faithful lies in the middle of this western inner wall of the Roman temple. In Greek and Roman times, the real theatrical statement was reserved for the main entrance on the eastern side, the *via sacra* (noted earlier, page 85) leading from the *agora* which formed the heart of the Greek city's commercial and political life. From the east, the visitor approached along a broad colonnaded street whose splendour reflected the 'sense of gorgeous, elaborate procession and ritual' of the Semitic tradition.²⁴ Remains of the huge colonnade (columns 1.4 metres thick) are still found in the vicinity of al-Qaimariye Street (Figure 4.2). The outer gateway (built either in AD 16–17 or 46–47)²⁵ partly survives (150 metres east of the Mosque, just before the road makes a slight dog-leg), the lintels of the doorways incongruously emerging just above the street. Probably more magnificent in its scale than the outer *propylaeum* on the western side, the decoration of the eastern outer gate, as shown by its surviving remains, is relatively restrained. After entering this gateway into the outer compound (*peribolos*), the visitor took a steadily rising path to a second gate whose stepped platform rose five metres above the *peribolos* ground level. Some idea of its scale is preserved at Bab Jairun on the eastern side of the Mosque. The forest of columns that once supported a high entablature pierced by a central arch has gone but enough remains of the side walls and pilasters to convey the order of magnitude. This form of 'Syrian arch' provided from the second century a theme of Syrian architecture for several centuries.²⁶

The huge double compound combined religious and commercial interests, perhaps reflecting a close connection between the role of the temple guardians and their private commercial interests, building on the eastern linkages between caravans and pilgrimage.²⁷ The period of Nabataean rule before the Romans would have fostered in Damascus the pilgrimage cults found throughout the Arab kingdom. So successful was the religious pitch that an outer enclosure was needed to

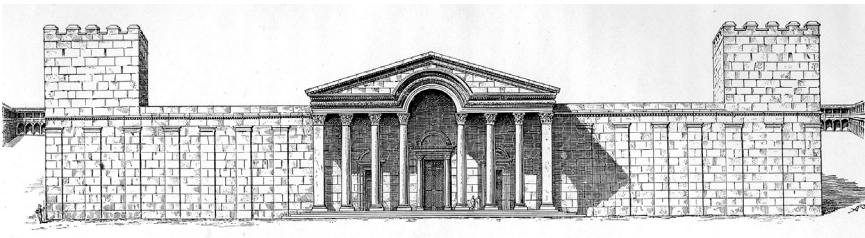


FIGURE 6.2 Eastern façade of the Temple of Jupiter *temenos*

Source: Dussaud 1922: pl. LII 1

handle the immense crowds who flocked to the regular festivals, affairs that combined the features of a market, a county fair and a religious feast. In the *peribolos*, the crowds mingled waiting to be admitted to the inner compound. Within the outer walls, a colonnade provided shelter from rain and sun.²⁸ Given the size of the Damascene hinterland and its agricultural riches, this formidable space was needed to accommodate the influx: Damascenes offering the product of their industry from cloth to metalware; Nabataeans from the Hauran; Ituraeans from the hills and valleys to the west; farmers of Aramaean descent from the Ghouta; nomadic Arabs from the steppe to the east; pilgrims from the coastal cities of Phoenicia; Italian soldier-settlers from the Beqa'a; or the throngs of other itinerants who were free under Pax Romana to roam the empire in search of a livelihood. So central was commerce to Damascus' prosperity that Christ's action in expelling the money-lenders sullyng the holy environs of the Jerusalem temple would probably have caused serious rioting if attempted in Damascus.

Once admitted to the inner *temenos*, a more reverential atmosphere impressed the visitor. As no ordinary citizens were admitted to the inner sanctum – the *cella*, free-standing within the *temenos* – they fulfilled their religious obligations at the outdoor altars and lustral basins or witnessed the sacrifices performed by the priests on high towers.²⁹ Only the high priests, however, celebrated the central ritual. It consisted probably of a ritual meal, part of the food being offered to the god. On certain feasts, ceremonial processions to the temple, presumably along the eastern processional way, carried portable images of the god. These were displayed from the *cella* or corner towers of the *temenos*, perhaps from apertures such as the small window still visible in the tympanum of the western *propylaeum*.³⁰

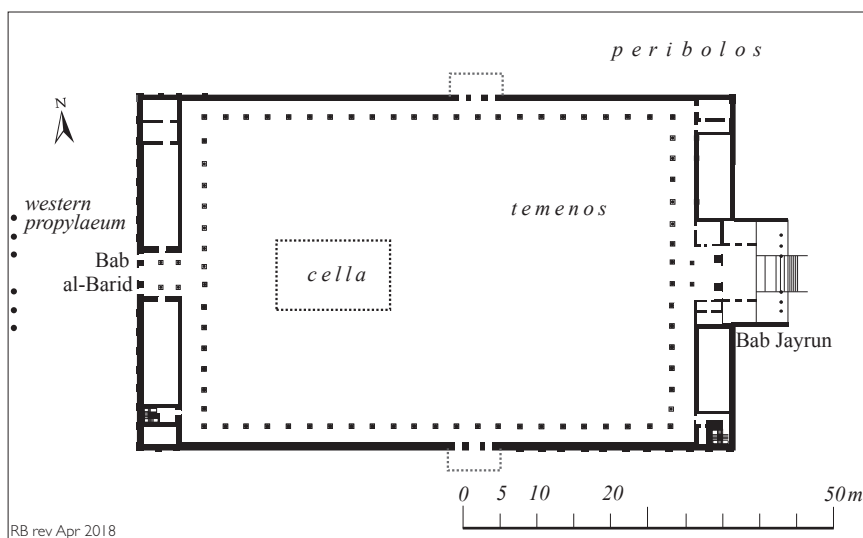


FIGURE 6.3 Temple of Jupiter Damascenus

Inside the present-day Mosque, there is little that reflects the Roman temple's inner compound. Some of the superb marble cladding in the eastern vestibule may well be inspired by Rome. The rest of the present courtyard dates from the rebuilding of the temple-church as a mosque in the eighth century. Yet, not too much imagination is required to recreate how the inner compound looked to a Roman visitor. The outer walls of the Mosque courtyard are either Roman or reconstructed along the Roman alignment. The idea of colonnades running around the inner side of the *temenos* has parallels elsewhere in the eastern Roman world (e.g. Palmyra). Some 26 of the columns and many of the capitals reused in the colonnade of the present courtyard date from the classical building, though probably moved from their original positions. Like many temples stemming from the Semitic tradition, the Hadad-Zeus-Jupiter Temple acquired in the Roman period four towers, one at each corner of the *temenos*, remains of which can still be seen today supporting the southern minarets. The idea was perhaps repeated on the corners of the *cella* whose remains have been identified under the western side of the *temenos* (see below). The use of towers as part of the temple ritual had a long tradition. Sacrifices in the Semitic world were performed on high places. Terraces or towers positioning the act of sacrifice as close as possible to the heavens symbolically recreated such features.

The four *temenos* corner towers perhaps determined the form of the internal colonnades. On the short sides, the space between the towers and the east and west doorways is now filled by four long enclosed halls which serve various purposes:



FIGURE 6.4 Palmyra, Bel Temple *cella* from south-east

reception and ablution halls on the west; and, on the north-east, a shrine (*mashhad*) whose significance to the Shi'ites is discussed later (see page 137).

The rest requires rather more imagination to reconstruct. The central focus of the Roman temple, the *cella*, stood in the western half of the stone-flagged³¹ courtyard terminating the axis from the east. We have little idea of the scale or decoration of the *cella* building. The survival on the north side of the *temenos* (against the western face of the Minaret of the Bride) of part of a fluted column, whose dimensions are considerably grander than any of those surviving in the inner compound, suggests that it originally formed part of the *cella* entrance or its surrounding colonnade. In 1941, the architect of the French antiquities service, Michel Ecochard, in a small dig under the Mosque treasury, discovered fragments of what Robert Amy later deemed to be part of the *cella* peristyle.³² The positioning of the shrine has since been confirmed by Syrian excavations at this point.³³ The *cella* of the Temple of Bel in Palmyra, whose construction also goes back to the late Augustan period and which survives in an extraordinary state of completeness, may thus provide the best parallel: a high shrine dominating an extensive enclosure defined by an imposing colonnade. The scale of the Bel Temple *cella* probably exceeds that of its Damascus contemporary.³⁴

First Christian mission

We must double back in time now since it is one of the ironies of the history of Damascus that just as the temple project approached completion, the next challenge to the domination of its resident cult was sowing its first seed. It was, however, to be 300 or more years before the Christian presence in the city became prominent. Given that Damascus was enjoying a period of unparalleled stability, it was inevitable that it would become an attractive destination for the propagators of the Christian 'mission'. Jews, as we have seen, had settled in Damascus as early as the Persian period. Following Christ's death in Jerusalem around AD 30, the first signs appeared of a cell of Christians in Damascus, perhaps Jews who had been exposed to the Christian message during visits to Jerusalem. These comprised the first group of adherents of Christ we hear of outside Palestine. Jesus' ministry around Lake Tiberias had also touched the southern fringes of the Hellenised communities of the Decapolis and among the audience Christ addressed may have been some Aramaeans or Nabataeans.

It is the visit to the city by Saul (after his conversion, Paul) a few years after Christ's death which has given the phrase 'Damascus road conversion' its cliché status, one of the few references to antiquity that rarely needs elaboration. According to the Acts of the Apostles, Saul, a fervently orthodox Jew from a Hellenised family of Tarsus (in Cilicia in modern Turkey), requested authorisation from the Jewish high priest of Jerusalem to travel to Damascus to detain and bring back to Jerusalem followers of Jesus (Acts 9.1–2) who were disturbing the orthodox Jews of the city. Approaching Damascus from Jerusalem, Paul was struck by the famous bolt of lightning. A voice told him: 'I am Jesus, the one you persecute. Go into the city

and you will be told what to do' (Acts 9.5–6). The location of this incident is now impossibly entangled in contradictory legends. It has been variously located in the Tabbale quarter immediately south-east of the city, at three other locations outside the southern walls and at Kawkab, 18 kilometres south-west. A commemorative chapel has been built a few kilometres along the Kawkab–Kiswe road east of Artus, a village on the road that leads to Quneitra and on to Jerusalem. The Kawkab option appears to have a tradition going back to the Middle Ages, perhaps earlier, and is often seen as the most reasonable attempt at historical supposition though the Franciscan complex at Tabbale, unfortunately not on any obvious route from Jerusalem, has other points in its favour.³⁵

Blinded, Paul was led by companions into the city to the house of a Jew called Judas on Straight Street.³⁶ A Christian disciple, Ananias, was directed by a vision to seek out Paul who was to be Christ's 'chosen instrument to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel' (Acts 9.15). Ananias went to Judas' house and, laying his hands on the visitor, restored Paul's sight. 'It was as though scales had fallen away from his eyes and immediately he was able to see again. He got up and was baptised' (Acts 9.18). Paul stayed at the house of Ananias and began preaching the new faith in the Damascus synagogues. Ananias' house is commemorated by the 'Church of Ananias' near Bab Sharqi. Remains below the present ground level may well date back to the fifth or sixth centuries but the discovery immediately to the west of a small shrine of the Roman period suggests the area already had a religious connotation on which the Ananias association was overlaid.

Paul later recalled:

When God called me, and chose to reveal His Son in me, so that I should preach Him to the Gentiles, I was in no hurry to confer with any human being, or to go up to Jerusalem to see those who were already apostles before me. Instead I went off to Arabia, and later I came back to Damascus.

Galatians 1.16–18

There are many problems in reconstructing what happened during his visit to 'Arabia' (probably the heavily Nabataean areas south of Damascus) and on his return to Damascus; issues that have exercised theologians and historians for the past 150 years. Exactly when did Paul re-enter and depart the city; and who controlled Damascus at that time? We will pass over the timing question since the exact sequence of events in the mid to late thirties AD does not affect our picture of the city, but the second puzzle raises some fundamental problems for our reconstruction of early Roman Damascus. If Damascus had been a Greek city-state that passed easily under Roman control, why was it mentioned in the New Testament Acts as supervised by a Nabataean ethnarch when Paul hastily departed at the end of his second visit?

While Nabataean influence in the city had existed long before Saint Paul, the exact status of this Nabataean 'ethnarch' has long caused controversy. Some scholars have speculated that Damascus came for a short period under direct

Nabataean rule. This was explained as resulting from a reversal of Roman policy under the Emperor Gaius Caligula (r.37–41) who, among his capricious tendencies was prepared to transfer sovereignty to favoured client rulers,³⁷ in this case favouring Aretas IV over the Jewish tetrarch, Herod Antipas.³⁸ The recent study of Paul's early career by the German scholar Rainer Riesner, however, restores the more traditional argument that the ethnarch was merely responsible to the Nabataean king for the consular and trade affairs of the Nabataean community in the city, like similarly titled officials in Alexandria and the Decapolis.

The ethnarch, however, wielded sufficient influence to seek to end Paul's troublesome activities, now perturbing not only the Jewish but the Arab (Nabataean) communities. His second stay in Damascus ended in a hurried departure.³⁹ 'The ethnarch of King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus to catch me and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped from his hands' (2 Corinthians 11.32–3).

The location of this incident is also the subject of much speculation. It may well have been engineered from the Nabataean quarter in the east of the city or from the south-east quarter, historically associated with the Jewish community. On the edge of the Jewish Quarter, the Chapel of Saint Paul claims the honours for Paul's descent. The chapel is built from the remains of an Arab gateway blocked in Ottoman times. The Greek Catholics took advantage of the gate's remains to turn them into a chapel in the 1920–1930s but given that the Arab gateway had a Roman predecessor (marking the southern point of the eastern *cardo*), such a closely guarded spot would seem the least likely choice for a clandestine getaway.

An imperial city

Paul's experiences in Damascus were to be primordial in spreading the new message: that all could be redeemed through baptism. His Damascus conversion relaunched the new religion, removing it from an exclusively Jewish milieu into Rome's Hellenised world.⁴⁰ Nothing was to be recorded regarding the Christians of Damascus for another three centuries during which time Damascus remained a pagan city, one of the prestige centres of the empire. Two emperors of the second century were to make important contributions to Damascus' status. Hadrian probably visited the city in 129–130, drawn no doubt by its famed temple, as part of his progress through the eastern provinces. Hadrian would have found a proud and confident city with a polyglot people and a flourishing economy. The emperor's high esteem for the city, familiar to him when he served briefly as Trajan's governor of Syria (117), is shown by his decision to raise it to the status of *metropolis*. Previously this honour had been reserved for one city in each province (in Syria's case, Antioch) but there is evidence that Hadrian's move was intended to cut Antioch down to size. The other cities so honoured in the province of Syria were also sizeable centres which dominated considerable territory: Tyre and Samosata. Damascus was now certainly in the first rank of cities in Roman eyes, after the provincial capital.

The second century in Roman architecture saw the adoption of the neo-Hellenistic style of Apollodorus of Damascus, one of the most prominent architects known from antiquity, who was responsible for many of Trajan's greatest monuments (Trajan r.98–117). His projects were conceived on an eye-catching scale with a close integration between landscape and spectacle. The fact that Apollodorus emerged from a city steeped in the Hellenistic tradition, perhaps rounded off by his architectural education in Alexandria, is probably no accident. Recent studies have emphasised how much imperial Rome owed to its eastern provinces and the development of spectacular streetscapes with their sweeping rows of columns fronting deep-shaded arcades.⁴¹ Such vistas, punctuated by arches and gateways, were an early realisation of the taste for the dramatic mixed with the practical. Strong and direct Roman control brought further upgrading of the monumental plan of many cities, aided by the availability of travelling teams of marble workers, possibly sent out from the quarries of Asia Minor. When Damascus reached the peak of its classical prestige in the reign of Septimius Severus (AD 193–211), how appropriate that the style it adopted was the fruit of one of its own sons. The fact that the lavish new style embellished a temple dedicated to the favoured cult of Jupiter was a further stimulus to extravagance.⁴²

We have only a sketchy overall picture of this phase of the city's classical urban structure and few hints of the flamboyant style survive. (One of the most notable is the western gateway to the Temple, whose impressive remains at the eastern end of the Suq al-Hamidiye were noted earlier (see page 84 and Figure 6.5).) The southern door to the Jupiter Temple *temenos* (now blocked up but largely visible from the street that runs along the south wall of the Umayyad Mosque) was refurbished and made a triple doorway in a style perhaps imitating the grand temples of Ba'albek or Asia Minor. The *temenos* eastern gateway (Figure 6.2) was also probably upgraded in Septimius' time.

The Syrian consorts

Septimius Severus had a strong personal motivation for the further embellishment of Syria's cities. He had married a daughter of the former ruling family of Emesa, Julia Domna, whose father was the high priest of the Emesan cult of the sun god Helios. (The cult was later to be ignominiously parodied in the antics of one of her sister's offspring, the future Emperor Elagabalus.) In addition to encouraging the new cult, Severus, under Julia Domna's influence, devoted considerable resources to the refurbishment of existing temples. (Julia's encouragement, for example, had influenced the restoration of the Temple of Vesta in the Forum in Rome.) A further factor was that Severus had gained power after a particularly nasty civil war centred on northern Syria. The struggle had capitalised on the rivalry between Antioch and nearby Laodicea (Latakia). Septimius Severus now wished to put all this behind him and establish his reputation as *Pacator Orbis* (peacemaker to the world) by reasserting the splendour of the Roman tradition.



FIGURE 6.5 Western *propylaeum* to the Temple of Jupiter

The Syrian marriage produced a remarkable line of emperors and, sustaining them, an even more remarkable line of strong-willed women who as wives, mothers or even openly as imperial administrators (*augustae*), largely directed the fortunes of the empire for 40 years (193–235), their activities probably underpinned by the family’s Syrian estates. Two of the emperors were unbalanced or tyrannical (Elagabalus and Caracalla); the last (Alexander Severus) was excessively youthful but mildly inspired by the women’s determination to sustain the imperial equilibrium of the Antonines. Their policy of taking the succession out of the hands of the legions and linking it again to family lineage perpetuated the Syrian line as it passed from sister to daughter. The men they had to work with were disappointing material but the four Syrian women provided the determination that

held the empire together before the Antonine afternoon faded altogether. In the remaining decades before Diocletian's succession in 284, the empire would constantly tremble on the brink of chaos.

The eastern question

Not only Severus' Syrian marriage and the course of his career as emperor showed how much the focus of the empire had shifted to the eastern provinces. The province of Syria was the key to Rome's presence in the east and the process of Hellenisation had put down its strongest roots in the cities of the region. The trickle of Syrian appointees to high office in Rome had now become a stream, though most appointees were from the Hellenized upper class and concentrated on a few notable families. Antioch became de facto capital of the Empire from where Septimius Severus set out on successive campaigns to check the Parthians.

When we last looked at the pattern of Roman administration of the Syrian province (pages 70–71), the initial, ostensibly loose, arrangement was under strain following the first major revolt by an eastern community against Roman rule, the Jewish revolt of AD 66–74. The subsequent suppression of the Judaeian and other client kingdoms (a process not completed until the end of the second century) brought a steady extension of Roman direct rule. By Hadrian's visit in 129–130 much of Syria was under conventional Roman administration, more closely guarded by Roman legions, though the Roman political presence at the local level was still patchy. The creation of the new province of Arabia in 106 had been accompanied by a considerable tightening of the Roman military presence in southern Syria. A communications route was constructed, the *Via Nova Traiana*, from the new provincial capital, Bostra (Bosra), south through Philadelphia ('Amman) to the Gulf of Aqaba at Aelia (Aqaba). This was connected to Damascus by a road built right across the lava wilderness of the Leja, an extraordinary work of engineering given the forbidding terrain.⁴³ This was later supplemented by a road system further to the east, completing the 'Romanisation' of the Hauran and reflecting the increasing importance of the trade route leading to Damascus from Arabia.

How was Damascus governed as a city within the Roman framework? Certainly its fitful tradition as a Greek city-state barely survived the changes of the first century BC and increasingly direct Roman control. For a while the Nabataean king may have had some say in its governance but, as we have seen, not direct control. Probably, the city just muddled along under various systems, depending on who was most influential in the area and how direct a role the Roman governor sought to take. The last vestiges of the tolerated Nabataean presence near Damascus were removed around AD 62. The Ituraean principality, which potentially encroached on communications between Damascus and Berytus, was removed with its annexation around AD 93. By the second century, it must have increasingly assumed the character of a regular Roman provincial centre, even celebrating its own regular games, the *Sebasmia* later to be commemorated on coins from Caracalla to Gallienus (211–268).⁴⁴ In spite of *metropolis* status conferred by Hadrian in 117,

Damascus was still subordinate to the main eastern capital at Antioch until Severus after 193 divided the old province of Syria into two. Part of southern Syria had already been incorporated into the province of Arabia in 106 (probably south of Soada). The rest of Syria was now divided into Syria Coele and Syria Phoenice. Initially Syria Coele (that elusive 'hollow Syria', now confusingly referring to the north of the province) was ruled from Latakia as Septimius Severus was still punishing Antioch for siding with his civil war opponent, Pescennius Niger. After a short period, however, the capital moved back to Antioch. The southern part of the old province, Syria Phoenice, lay south of a line drawn inland from Baniyas on the central Syrian coast. It comprised present-day Lebanon and southern Syria including Damascus, Homs and Palmyra.

The new province of Syria Phoenice was probably ruled by a consul appointed to report to Antioch (capital of all the eastern provinces), with a Roman administrative presence for fiscal control, judicial matters and security.⁴⁵ Symptomatic of the dearth of hard information on the administration of most of Syria, however, is the fact that we cannot even be certain where Syria Phoenice was governed from. The assumption has been that its 'capital' was Tyre but it could equally have been Sidon, Berytus or Damascus. Also not to be discounted is the possibility that there was no fixed capital, especially given that the real Roman administration was the army (which had bases in Lebanon and at Raphaneai west of Emesa) and that those responsible for the main aspects of civilian affairs – justice and tax – moved around regulating and collecting on the spot, much like the 'circuit' system in British India.

Population

Roman Syria probably had a population of around four million. Its major population centres were considerable *metropoleis*. Antioch, one of the three great cities of the Empire, perhaps reached 200,000 free citizens at its peak. By comparison, Alexandria the second city of the Empire, according to Diodorus Siculus, had 300,000 free citizens. There is no evidence that Damascus reached these sorts of figures, based on the population likely to have been accommodated in the space enclosed by the Roman walls. Assuming the Roman city's footprint did not exceed 115 hectares, Diodorus' population density (equivalent to 300 per hectare) would translate to a maximum population for Damascus of 35,000. Allowance must, however, be made for the space taken up by the temple and the *agora* and a lower figure seems more likely.⁴⁶ The fact that Roman tombs have been found in recent decades not far from the city walls on the western and northern sides suggests that the city was largely surrounded by open spaces with no suburbs.⁴⁷

Damascus was certainly a middle-order centre, its numbers not inflated by any outside factor such as a major legionary unit. It should be borne in mind, though, that in Roman times the size of the peri-urban population could often multiply the numbers of those using the city as a market and administrative centre. Even a secondary city such as Apamea recorded a considerable population. The census

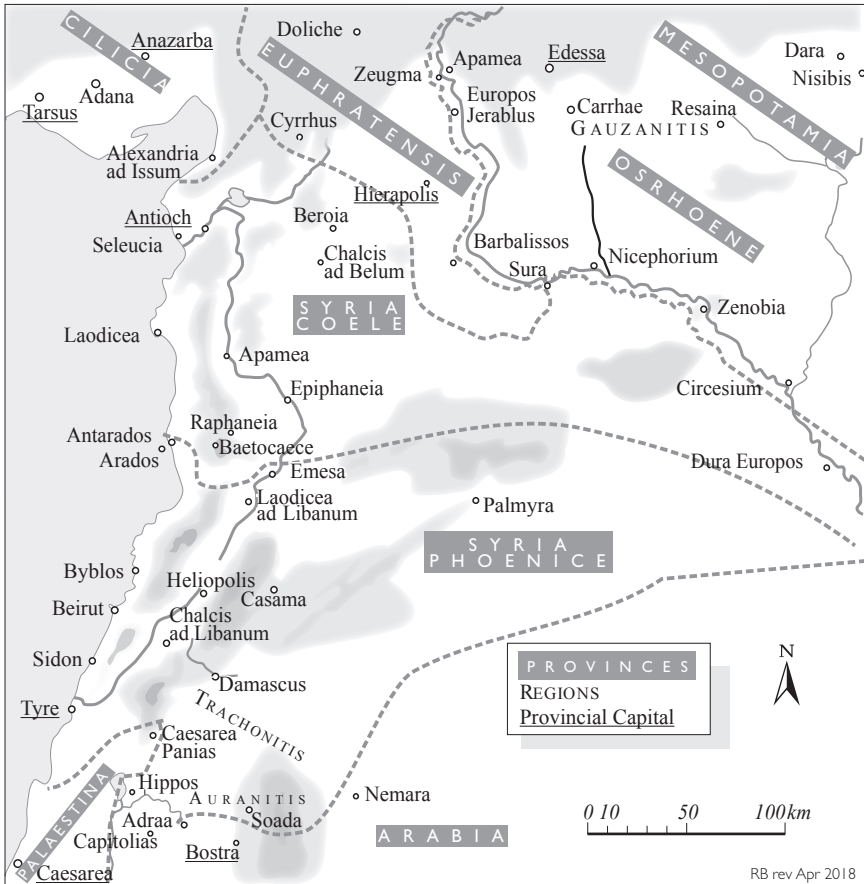


FIGURE 6.6 Roman provincial divisions to AD 298

of AD 6 under the consulship of Sulpicius Quirinius counted 117,000 citizens of Apamea (male and female). With slaves, freedmen and non-citizens, the total figure may have been as high as 400,000 but this probably included a good deal of the rich agricultural countryside. The city of Cyrrhus, north of Aleppo, was never a major urban centre, for example, but its district is known to have had a total Christian population in the fifth century of 200,000, to which should be added a proportion of pagans and assorted heretics, no doubt. In Roman Syria, a city's importance reflected its productive surrounds. It was largely the importance of its cult, its entrepreneurial role and the intensity of agricultural development in its hinterland that determined the daytime population. A figure of 50,000 people regularly using Damascus as a centre of economic activity therefore seems a reasonable guesstimate.

It was noted above that the Qanawat canal (page 76) fed off the right bank of the Barada. This enabled water for the first time to be diverted to the southern side

of the ridge on which the city stood. It was also in Roman times that the Derani and Mezzawi canals were built, likewise drawing water off the Barada to the west. An extensive area south and west of the city was thus opened for Roman settlement and the present-day suburbs of Mezze and Deraya derive their names from villages which were in existence by the third century AD when they were included in the Roman cadastre. Recent research based on the careful study of old aerial photos has revealed an extensive parcelling of the land to the west and south of the city on a scale consistent with the Roman 'centuriation' system.⁴⁸ The Roman city was protected by walls, as we know from the accounts of St Paul's visit. Recent Syrian excavations on the south and south-east sides confirm a complex system of defences, dated to the first to third centuries AD, and running a little south of the medieval walls. The Roman defences comprised a stone inner wall, a lower outer wall positioned on the edge of a five metre-wide ditch which could be filled with water and an outer counterscarp.⁴⁹

The Roman improvements enabled Damascus to realise its potential on an unprecedented scale. It was an industrious town renowned for its production of arms, silken cloth and glass in particular. Though Syria was not a major exporter of food to Rome, the immediate Damascus region achieved fame for its fruits. Its wine, particularly from the slopes of the Anti-Lebanon around Helbun (classical Chalybon), had been famous since Persian times; its olives and pistachios were prized; above all it would seem, its plums enjoyed wide fame, making 'damaschino' the familiar word for the fruit in several modern European languages. Apricots and peaches were probably introduced at this time. The consistent quality of the products earned permanent export markets, the fruit probably being shipped in dried form. In the fourth century, Damascene figs inspired the following praise:

The city which in very truth belongs to Zeus and is the eye of the whole East, which in all other respects excels for the beauty of its shrines and the size of its temples . . . it is fitting that she alone should keep up her reputation by the possession of a plant of this excellence.⁵⁰

City and country

Damascus, as noted, not only had the Ghouta to draw on, it was also a regional centre for the prosperous agricultural area of the Beqa'a and for the Hauran, the Roman Auranitis. South-west of Damascus between the Leja and the Golan heights, a network of new economic centres or *metrokomiai*, each possibly linked to an imperial estate, completed the process of pacification and Romanisation of this once bandit-ridden area (Figure 6.7). Damascus became the centre of a major drive for the economic development of the region, further increasing the prosperity and importance of the town itself and encroaching on the basically Aramaic culture of the countryside by hastening its assimilation into the Roman world. In Auranitis stable rule brought vigorous administration and many civic improvements such as a network of water supply channels. Bosra, Suweida, Adraa (Dera'a) and Qanawat

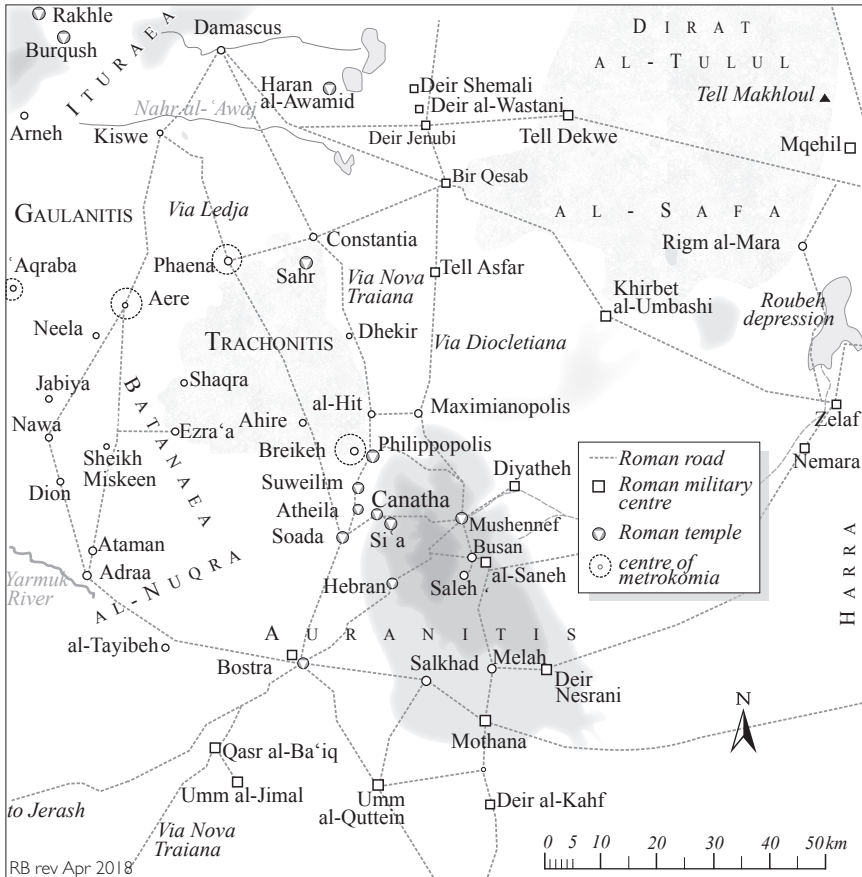


FIGURE 6.7 Hauran in Roman times

all survive as major centres today and, in an uncanny repeat of the process that took place in the early Roman Empire, were again (before 2011) flourishing with the area's economic regeneration after years of neglect.

Religion should not be forgotten in this examination of how the 'Romanisation' process took hold so quickly. The new prosperity funded the development of the local cult centres. Even in remote areas, a dense network of shrines sprang up, often on sites venerated since Aramaean times. A particular focus, to take one example, was the region of Mount Hermon. This dreaming, usually snow-capped, peak looms above much of the countryside and is visible from Damascus. The Semitic tradition associated such high places with Baal, the Canaanite god whose worship was abhorred by the Jews of the Old Testament as a denial of Yahweh's supremacy. Around Hermon clustered many centres of worship, some possibly linked to the cult centre at Ba'albek (Heliopolis), massively developed in Roman times. There are still remains of 30 or so Roman-period temples within

12 kilometres of the mountain peak. (The most easily accessible from Damascus are the complex at Burqush and nearby Rakhleh.) In Roman times, the summit (2,814 metres) was marked by a sanctuary, the highest in the ancient world, probably dedicated to Hadad. A manifestation of Baal, the cult was associated with Zeus-Jupiter in Damascus.⁵¹

To find some clues as to the physical milieu of Roman Damascus, the Hauran east of Mount Hermon still provides the best sense of how the classical order fitted into an Arab setting. In the bustling towns and villages of the Hauran you still find Roman temples nestling among the basalt houses, Corinthian columns poking up from village courtyards or a Roman theatre emerging triumphant above the clutter of 1,800 years. Admittedly the style of sculpture, though emulating a Greek-Roman repertoire which included the cultivation of the grape under Dionysus' patronage, can be clumsy and provincial but it often achieves a fluidity that defies the medium. A good sample is found in the basalt statues assembled in the garden of the National Museum in Damascus.⁵²

Damascus controlled even wider territory, stretching from the desert of Palmyra to the hinterland of Tyre. It reached to the frontiers of Herod's kingdom, at the southern slopes of Hermon, Caesarea Paneas and Gaulanitis (modern Golan). We know little of the administrative and fiscal arrangement that governed the interplay between city and countryside; whether the city controlled its satellite villages and regions or even whether it governed a defined administrative district. It seems likely, though, that villages were controlled ultimately by local power brokers who acquired Roman citizenship in return for favours. We know not a thing about whether Damascus taxed its subsidiary towns and villages or how it raised its finances from goods sold or traded through its markets. We have not a clue as to what revenues were raised by the great Temple of Jupiter from its rural pilgrims and the traders who used its outer zone or whether, like the Husn Suleiman cult centre to the north, it enjoyed an assured income from endowed lands and villages. We have the occasional glimpse, through rare inscriptions, of the life of the Damascene elite enjoying, as would many future generations, the privileges of a Ghouta rural retreat with easy access to the hunt.⁵³

Like most parts of Syria, the Damascus region found under Roman rule an unprecedented degree of consensus. Within this Roman cocoon, the many ethnic groups developed a *modus vivendi* underpinned by the region's new prosperity. The already extensive Hellenisation of the upper levels of society became something that other strata, at least superficially, sought to emulate. The result may have been somewhat like the picture we have of the mercantile class in Palmyra where basically Semitic mores adopted the trappings of the Greek-Roman canon. The busts and statues may emulate classical styles but the jewels and the costumes veer towards the oriental.

The stabilisation of the area brought an expansion in long-distance trade that not only led to increased demand for Syria's own products but greatly enhanced Syria's entrepôt trade. The Augustan peace had ushered in an age of prosperity marked by an increase in demand from the burgeoning upper classes of Rome.

The development of trade across the so-called 'Silk Route' from Asia to the Mediterranean to unprecedented levels placed Syria astride the traffic in high-cost, low-tonnage luxury goods from the east (silks, furs, cottons, pepper, spices, dried food, aromatics, rare animals, precious stones, rare woods, ebony – even prostitutes). The operation of the eastern trade routes is a fascinating topic whose surface has barely been skimmed.⁵⁴ It would be fanciful, however, to imagine a single transcontinental autoroute. More likely there was a huge web of trade contacts and intermediaries between east and west, with strands spreading from as far north as the Russian steppe and as far south as the sea routes from Indonesia via Madagascar and East Africa. The choice of routes was a complex matter and the selection of intermediaries shifted with political changes as well as the passing fads of demand.

Damascus formed one of the choke points towards which the routes converged. It tapped particularly into the trade flowing from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean, the axis of the spices and luxury trade. Two of the traditional trade paths were now booming: the central desert route from Mesopotamia via Palmyra⁵⁵ and the southern route through Petra in present-day southern Jordan. As security took hold in the desert, Rome ensured that the trade became more regulated. The Romans encouraged entrepôts where goods could be exchanged, duties and taxes levied and a *bourse* established to keep prices stabilised at reasonably predictable levels. The natural choice for the desert traffic became Palmyra. Petra, more specialised in the aromatics trade, found its importance had already declined when the Nabataean capital moved north to Bosra with the establishment of direct Roman rule. Palmyra, under the equally entrepreneurial Palmyrene oligarchy, enjoyed more freedom to act as a go-between with the Parthians who controlled the Tigris-Euphrates lands to the east. Moreover, Palmyra had established its own depots at the mouth of the Gulf and thus secured monopoly control even before the desert crossing.⁵⁶

Much of Palmyra's trade traditionally found its way to the sea via Emesa to either Tartus or Latakia, but some had always been deflected south via Damascus to reach the more important sea ports of Tyre and Sidon that were probably centres for processing the raw silk from Asia.⁵⁷ Damascus also profited from the increased trade now flowing up from Arabia via Bosra. There is no evidence, however, of any particularly close political ties between the ruling class of Damascus and Palmyra. Palmyra's dynastic and family links seem to be more clearly oriented towards Emesa. Though Palmyra had not embraced a monarchic structure, there was prestige in marrying into families that enjoyed good Arab princely lineage. Emesa was the nearest princely seat, its ruling family held power under Roman tutelage until its abolition in the late first or second century AD but even after that the hereditary role of high priest remained a post of great prestige, as we have seen in the marriage of a daughter of the house to Septimius Severus.

Notes

1 Millar 1993.

2 Pollard 2000: 252.

- 3 Wacholder 1962: 16.
- 4 Wacholder 1962: 23.
- 5 Kaizer 2002: 56 points out that in Palmyra, the intermingling of the Arab and Mesopotamian religious worlds occurred without difficulty and worshippers could move between the two cultural spheres.
- 6 Millar 1987: 145. Ball 2016: 61 says one fifth.
- 7 Josephus 1970: 2, 20, 2 (559–561); 7, 8, 7 (368) – second reference gives a higher figure, 18,000 including women and children. Josephus' absolute numbers are probably, as usual, an exaggeration – see footnote 45 to Chapter 6.
- 8 The most recent survey (Retsö 2003: 408–409) prefers to date its absorption to the next century.
- 9 Strabo *Geography* 16, 2, 20.
- 10 Freyberger in Gaube and Fansa 2000: 213; Freyberger 1989: 61–86; Sartre 2001: 657 n.83.
- 11 Rey-Coquais 1987: 213–214.
- 12 Rostovtzeff 1957 I: 269.
- 13 Freyberger 1989.
- 14 Augier 1999: 770; Freyberger in Gaube and Fansa 2000: 213.
- 15 SEG XXXIX 1989 # 1579, though, notes that the date is ambiguous and could be 30 years earlier.
- 16 Pococke 1745 II: 120–122 and pl. XXI.
- 17 It is not clear whether he was allowed entry to the Mosque or had to confine his visit to a glimpse of the courtyard.
- 18 Creswell 1969 I/1: 155 and n.1, 2.
- 19 Porter 1855 I: 48.
- 20 Spiers' first publication on the Mosque was an article prepared for *The Builder* (21 April 1894).
- 21 One column (no longer *in situ*) carried a Greek inscription recording the limit within which right of asylum in the temple could be claimed. Jalabert 1912: 137; Hanauer 1911: 206–209.
- 22 Akili (professor in the Architecture Faculty at Damascus University) examines the building in details from both architectural and historical viewpoints – Akili 2009. The British scholar, Creswell, had earlier provided a ground-breaking study in the context of Early Muslim architecture, overturning many assumptions about the origin of the mosque—Creswell 1969.
- 23 Two studies have relaunched the debate: Ball's 2016 *Rome in the East* and Freyberger's 1998 analysis of the early imperial temple complexes in Syria's main 'caravan stations' (not including Damascus), *Die frühkaiserzeitlichen Heiligtümer der Karawanstationen im hellenistischen Osten*. Their emphasis is different. Freyberger puts more weight on the commissioning by local clan leaders, intent on lending prestige to their projects, of designs which relied on the copying of Roman metropolitan architectural styles, probably via workshops based on the Hellenised cities of the East with some influence from Mesopotamia and Iran. Ball is more inclined to see the inspiration as purely local with some superficial borrowing of decorative elements from Rome.
- 24 Ball 2016: 433.
- 25 Freyberger 1989: 66; Kader 1996: 160.
- 26 A bronze coin issued under Caracalla (r.211–217) reflects a similar local temple style depicting the façade of the temple at neighbouring Abila Lysaniae (Suq Wadi Barada): a monumental central gateway between corner towers. Dussaud 1922: 230, fig. 4. See also Barkay 2001–02 on emergence of the 'Syrian arch' in the coin record.
- 27 Freyberger 1998: 109.
- 28 There are still some remains of the columns along the street leading north from a point ten metres inside the outer gateway, see Figure 4.2.
- 29 Although we have no direct evidence of how sacrifices and other rituals were performed in the Damascus temple, see Kaizer 2002 for an interesting discussion on ritual practice

- at Palmyra where practices were probably analogous. In the Palmyra Bel Temple, a special passageway entered the temple *temenos* underground to allow for the introduction of larger beasts for sacrifice.
- 30 Freyberger 1998: 112–113 and n.1524
 - 31 Excavations by the Syrian antiquities authorities in the early 1960s revealed remains of the pre-Islamic stone flagging of the courtyard 30 centimetres below the Umayyad level.
 - 32 Amy 1950: 117 n.2.
 - 33 Bounni 2004: 595–599.
 - 34 While the Palmyra *temenos* is almost three times as grand as that in Damascus, this compensates for the lack of an outer *peribolos*. Another surviving parallel, on a slightly smaller scale but impressive for the beauty of its surroundings, is the Roman temple at Baetocaece (Husn Suleiman), also first to second century AD, in the remote reaches of the Ansariye mountain range, 250 kilometres north of Damascus. Here, amid peaceful mountain scenery just below one of the peaks of the range in a setting disturbed only by the occasional sound of goat bells, lies a temple, also dedicated to Jupiter. Its *temenos* wall, formed of massive blocks, is virtually intact. The format is again much the same: a large compound with monumental gateway at one end and *cella* at the other, the shrine itself now rather tumbled by the actions of earthquakes over the years but just waiting for a sensitive restoration project.
 - 35 Jalabert 1920: column 129 cites the options and Weber 1993: 166–167 has a more recent summary. Jalabert prefers the Kawkab option, favoured by the Greek Orthodox. He cited remains that might have related to a Byzantine church on this spot identified in the early part of the twentieth century. A Franciscan chapel and convent mark the Tabbale site. The Protestant missionary Josias Porter was sceptical of the Catholic claims, noting that they were recent in origins and reflected the need to offer a destination convenient to travellers – Porter 1855 I: 43. The Piacenza pilgrim visited a monastery of the conversion of Saint Paul in the sixth century three kilometres from the city but we have no other details of its location – Wilkinson 2002: 295.
 - 36 Though Acts 9.11 refers to Judas' house on Straight Street, we have no indication of where it was located along the thoroughfare. Nasrallah 1944: 25.
 - 37 Riesner 1998; Taylor 1992: 726; Barrett 1989: 183; Bowersock 1983: 67–68; the theory was first proposed in Jewett 1979: 30–33.
 - 38 A family issue divided the two rulers. Herod Antipas, formerly married to a daughter of Aretas IV, ditched her for Herodias, his niece who had been married to his half-brother. John the Baptist took strong exception to this marriage. As a result John was imprisoned at Machaerus (overlooking the Dead Sea in Jordan) and beheaded at the request of Herodias' daughter, Salome. (The legend of his head later appears in conjunction with the cathedrals in Homs and Damascus.) Antipas was banished to Lyon in 40 by order of Caligula.
 - 39 An approximate chronology would have Paul arriving first in Damascus and visiting Arabia 33–34; Damascus again 34–37. The issues, however, are vexed and many authors put the final departure later – AD 39 (e.g. Nasrallah 1944: 48).
 - 40 Degeorge 1997: 67–68; Frend 2003: 27.
 - 41 Among recent studies – monographs by Bejor 1999; Burns 2017; Ball 2016: 310–325.
 - 42 Jupiter had been Hadrian's initial choice as god to be honoured on the temple platform of Jerusalem, symbolising the triumph of Rome's will over the temple. A further indication of Damascus' closeness to the imperial cause was its designation as one of the four *koina* through which the cult of the emperor was organised in Syria – Butcher 2003: 370; Rey-Coquais 2001: 361.
 - 43 Stein 1936: 69.
 - 44 Jalabert 1920: 124; Millar 1993: 316; Rey-Coquais 1987: 215; inscription probably found at Ostia – *Corpus inscriptionum latinorum (CIL)* vol xiv no. 474; Moretti *IAG* no. 90. Coin record – Wroth 1899: 286 no. 22; 288 no. 31, 32, 33.
 - 45 Butcher 2003: 86–87 notes that the late Roman system of administration was exceedingly complex and the dates and sequence of changes are not always clear.

- 46 Haas 1997: 36 accepts 200 persons per hectare as the norm for a city of Alexandria's status. His calculation, based on an area of 1000 hectares, gives a population for Alexandria of 200,000. The area of *intra-muros* Damascus is assumed to be 115 hectares. On Alexandria's scale, its classical population would only be around 22,500. Antioch estimate from Downey 1961: 583 – Saint John Chrysostom's figure.
- 47 The difficulty of Roman population estimates is underlined by the figure of 10,500 given by Josephus for the number of Jews slaughtered in Damascus in retaliation for the Jewish revolt in Jerusalem in AD 66. Like many of his statistics, it seems grossly inflated and provides no guide to the overall population figure. Schürer 1973 III: 14; Josephus 1970: 2, 20, 2 (561); 7, 8, 7 (368). See Butcher 2003: 104–107 for a survey of population indicators for Roman Syria.
- 48 Dodinet *et al.* 1990.
- 49 The full range of defenses might only have been completed by the late third century at the time of Diocletian's defensive build-up. The recent research is reported in Dabbour 2012.
- 50 Millar 1993: 312 quoting Loeb translation of *Letters of Julian*, ep. 80. See also Jalabert 1920; Addison 1838: 100.
- 51 The debate on the significance of the Mount Hermon cult began with Warren: 1867. For recent discussions, see Dar 1993; Hajjar 1990: 25–32, 232–233; Millar 1990: 20–23; Ruprechtsberger 1992, 1994. Aliquot 2008a now provides a comprehensive survey of all sites on the Syrian and Lebanese slopes of the mountain and on the religious significance of the area – Aliquot 2008b.
- 52 The style is discussed in the important article by Ernest Will 1963, 'La Syrie romaine entre l'Occident Gréco-Romain et l'Orient Parthe' in the volume of Will's collected articles.
- 53 Rey-Coquais 1987: 208.
- 54 For a stimulating survey of the pattern of trade routes across Syria – Millar 1998.
- 55 Gawlikowski 1994 emphasises the primary importance of the 'gulf trade' for Palmyra and Millar 1998 argues that the prime role for Central Asian flows was reserved for the northern route.
- 56 Butcher 2003: 191 points out that at 25 per cent, the rate of duty on goods imported into the empire from Parthia was ten times the normal rate at other points of entry.
- 57 We have no precise information on how much of Palmyra's trade ended up in Damascus' hands. A recent survey of the coin evidence in Roman Syria – Augé and Duyrat 2003: 168 – notes that 7 per cent of the coins found in Palmyra appeared to be of Damascene origin, considerably less than those from Antioch (27 per cent) whose dominance reflected its role as chief mint; but a good deal more than other Syrian cities including Emesa (not significant).

7

HOLDING THE LINE (269–610)

We have seen (page 93) that the Jewish revolt in Palestine in AD 66 was the first major shock for laissez-faire-style Roman administration. In 132, a second Jerusalem revolt had further jolted Rome out of any assumption that it could take a hands-off approach to governing Syria. A new province had been created out of Judaea that eliminated any reference to a Jewish identity. By the late second century, a deliberate policy of emphasising the ‘Roman-ness’ of the province had been adopted.

In 269, well over a century after this second intervention in Judaea, Rome faced a third spectacular revolt. This time Palmyra sought to push the limits of Roman tolerance. Palmyra had increasingly mimicked Roman political and social mores but its population was still identifiably Semitic. (A great majority of inscriptions are in both Palmyrene (akin to early Arabic) and Greek.) It linked its prosperity, however, firmly to Rome’s fortunes in the area. Why, then, did it suddenly break the mould? While it might be tempting to see Palmyra as a nascent Arab power, the explanation for its revolt against Roman rule was not an assertion of ethnic or religious identity but sheer opportunism.

Nature of the Persian threat

The background to these events was increasing tension with the Sasanian Persians. From the earliest Roman presence in Syria, Parthia was a preoccupation; a problem ‘as inevitable as it was insoluble’, in the words of Mortimer Wheeler.¹ The tensions originated in the messy collapse of the Seleucid Empire, its territory divided between Rome and Persia. The dividing line wandered north–south without any natural or logical line of division. To the east, the Parthians were a military aristocracy known as the Arsacids, a group of semi-nomadic origins who had taken over the Seleucid province of Parthyene or Parthava in 247 BC. Their feudal kingdom

thrived on their talents as imitators of everything they found convenient to borrow from others, particularly the Greeks. Their official religion was Mazdaism but they were tolerant of other faiths. Their military record was formidable and after AD 11 was combined with a more aggressive form of foreign policy and strong sense of Iranian identity. Moving their capital to Ctesiphon (near Seleucia-on-the-Tigris), they began to seek greater control of the increasingly lucrative trade between Rome and China.

Occupation of the great westward bend of the Euphrates gave the Parthians a significant advantage in launching attacks aimed at Antioch, barely 200 kilometres west of the river. Pompey's settlement defused tensions only temporarily. Rome concluded that if its grip slipped in Syria, the Parthians would seize their opportunity to push westwards. Whenever Rome was distracted, as in the period of the Late Republican civil wars, the Parthians' exploratory campaigns were a regular part of the calendar until Augustus' peace settlement in 1 BC settled the issue for the moment. Fortunately for Rome, in this early stage the Parthians lacked a permanent professional army that could be deployed to occupy territory, though Augustus saw the need to base legions in Syria to back his eastern diplomacy. The Parthian incursions in the first two centuries AD tended to be raiding expeditions. Later, however, the Mesopotamian frontier (and its extension north into what is now eastern Turkey) became the only point on all Rome's frontiers at which the Empire faced a sustained challenge from an organised state capable of putting strategic-level armed formations into the field.

Attempts by Trajan to advance into Mesopotamia, though promptly abandoned by his successor Hadrian, were the 'beginning of an obsession'.² Probes into the Parthian kingdom persisted throughout most of the following century: under Marcus Aurelius in 164–166, Septimius Severus in 194–199 and Caracalla in 211–217. While these emperors sought to stabilise the eastern frontier by going on the offensive, they found that it was difficult, even with Rome's massive forces, to maintain a presence as far as Ctesiphon on the middle Tigris, let alone in lower Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf. In taking the offensive, Roman main force expeditions (such as Trajan's push as far as the Persian Gulf) were obliged to take the northern route via the Turkish lowlands. The presence of friendly local buffer states in Osrhoene and Armenia were essential to their eastern posture. Much of Rome's eastern policy for the first two centuries had been directed at stabilising these regions and ensuring the security of this second major trade route to the east.³ From Caracalla (r.211–217) on, however, the Caesars were forced to spend a good deal of their time based in Syria directly leading campaigns against Rome's most determined and capable enemy.

In 224, the Parthians themselves were overthrown by the new Sasanian masters of Persia, an event that gave the eastern frontiers a new importance. The Sasanian dynasty was fired by a determination to regain the traditional reach of the Achaemenid Empire as far as the Mediterranean. Both empires indulged rival dreams of restoring Alexander's and Xerxes' realms, inspiring campaigns that swept both ways across the Euphrates. The issue was no longer disputes about buffer

states but wars with big strategic objectives on both sides. Trade no longer softened the confrontation. Unlike the Parthians, the Sasanians had no interest in encouraging the east–west trade and the advantages of a centre such as Palmyra were now irrelevant. The Sasanians took Dura Europos on the Euphrates in 256 and Rome was hard pressed to counter the Sasanians' strategic threat. No longer were the wars confined to seasonal campaigns; Sasanian forces could strike right into the heart of Syria using the springboard of the Euphrates bend to push as far as Antioch itself. The Sasanian Persians were masters of siege warfare and the new threat required 'hardened' defences.

In 259, the unthinkable happened. A Roman emperor, Valerian, was captured in battle along with his legions and standards outside Edessa, capital of the new province of Osroene (replacing since 214 the client kingdom of the Abgars). A Caesar had been led into captivity and reputedly tortured to death, an unprecedented humiliation. A new emperor, Gallienus (r.260–268) sped to Syria with strategic reinforcements but in order to hold the situation in the interim he appointed Odenathus, a Palmyrene leader (r.256–267), as *Dux Orientis* (commander of forces in the east). Odenathus more than excelled in his role and managed to pursue the retreating Sasanian forces as far as Ctesiphon.

As a result, Odenathus enjoyed enormous stature as a trusted ally who had succeeded in missions far beyond Palmyra's desert limits. His wife, who may or may not have played some role in the assassination of her husband in 267, enjoyed a less compelling sense of proportion. Taking power on her husband's death, she ventured far beyond Palmyra's mandate, even assuming Rome's mantle as 'Ruler of the East'. She may have believed that given the number of challenges that now beset the empire in both Europe and Asia, the moment was ripe to provoke its break up. Alternatively, she may simply have sought to restore Palmyra's fortunes by seizing territory that would give access to the incense trade which still flowed along the Red Sea routes. The story of Zenobia's spectacular defeat, the interception of her attempt to flee across the Euphrates, her humiliating parade through Rome as Aurelian's trophy (a dread that had driven another queen to pre-emptive suicide three centuries earlier) have been well described in many accounts.⁴

The consequences for Damascus of Zenobia's thrust into Egypt, whether aimed at securing a new trade advantage or as a challenge to Rome itself, are not known. Damascus probably played no role in Zenobia's folly but her opening campaign towards Egypt took her through southern Syria where she gained some support from the desert Arabs.⁵ The episode underlined the risks of Rome's erstwhile policy of relying on loosely affiliated local allies. The lesson brought a further tightening of the Roman system of administration and a major strengthening of the defensive *limes* (frontiers). The existing lines of communication running broadly north–east to south–west across Syria were greatly strengthened; new legions were brought in and more forts constructed; administrative divisions were made smaller. Rome, finally total master of Syria, stood face-to-face against an eastern enemy; there were no compliant intermediaries, Arab or otherwise. The last centuries of Rome's world empire were to be determined in Syria.

Hard and soft frontiers

The varying response to this threat in the form of Rome's frontiers in the eastern provinces is a complex issue which is attracting intense research and speculation. We shall examine here only a small window on the strategic picture. Far away Damascus could never divorce itself from Rome's constant preoccupations with its frontiers. The Roman eastern frontier stretched well over 1,000 kilometres from Trapezus (Trebizond) on Turkey's Black Sea coast to Aelia (Aqaba). Damascus was a potential weak node on the jagged axis, a point where the line of control veered almost into the fertile zone and close to a major population centre, only 100 kilometres from the sea. Unlike Apamea, Beroea or Antioch, Damascus was right on the interface between Roman territory and the void beyond the *limes*. The first researcher to plot the defensive system of Roman Syria, the French Jesuit,



FIGURE 7.1 Black Sea to Red Sea – eastern frontier c.AD 300

Antoine Poidebard, described Damascus as 'the strategic centre for three fortified route systems along the edge of the desert' protected by a 'vast defensive triangle': Palmyra–Damascus–Bostra.⁶

Even before the creation of Provincia Arabia in 106, the province of Syria had been reinforced with a *limes* to police and regulate trade and traditional nomadic movement as well as to speed communications with the Euphrates.⁷ It was, initially, a comparatively 'soft' frontier zone that depended on rapport with the Arabs and on good intelligence rather than on solid fortifications. This lack of a hard 'defence in depth' screen of any sophistication immediately east of Damascus has a number of explanations. In this soft zone, the need was for basic control and intelligence: fortified guard posts and towers linked by a prepared route to speed communication. There was no fertile land to watch over and the wilderness was traditionally nomad territory, not amenable to permanent administration. There were few water points, essential to the establishment of forts. The threat here was assessed as a sporadic one from occasional raids by Arab groups or attempts to move livestock west when drought raged.⁸

Trajan in the early second century was the first to take a strategic look at the eastern frontier and see the need for a continuous 'static defence' barrier. He joined the main points of the central sector with his Via Nova Traiana, its extension northward from Bosra providing a firm base for his efforts to protect the desert fringes. Troops were deployed in local concentrations, for example to the south in the Hauran, to keep routes safe from bandits and prevent disruption by nomadic elements. The first fortification noted near Damascus is that east of Dumeir (Thelseai).⁹ The late second century had brought a further expansion of the Roman presence. By the reign of Septimius Severus (r.193–211), five Roman legions were stationed in Syria, two of which had the specific designation Parthica. They provided a strategic reserve behind the frontier zones and served as the core for field armies deployed to the east. The legionary deployments closest to Damascus were at Bostra (III Cyrenaica) and at Raphaneai (in the Orontes Valley, west of Homs), but smaller units were located closer, for example, at Phaena (modern Mismiye) on the northern entry to the Leja (Trachonitis).

With the fall of Dura to the Sasanians in 256 the great trade routes across the Arab-populated desert became defunct. As security was no longer assured trade could no longer blur the lines of confrontation between east and west. After 273, Palmyra was not an entrepôt but an occupied city. The revolt of Zenobia having finally ended the client system, Diocletian from the last decade of the third century put immense resources into an improved defensive zone (the Strata Diocletiana) running from Bostra to the Euphrates at Sura. 'Rome replaced Palmyra in policing the steppe'.¹⁰ Instead of the spongy frontier system with Roman-manned forts dotted among Arab populations, a more sophisticated system of 'elastic defence' was put into place. The legions were now positioned closer to the potential battle zones ready to be rushed to counter any threat along the line. Evidence of the new defence doctrine is clearly evident north-east of Damascus. Here the Diocletianic reforms can still be seen in textbook configuration. On the 200 kilometres stretch

FIGURE 7.2 Strata Diocletiana

the Arab (r.244–249) was possibly not simply honorific but marked an initiative to settle near Damascus veterans of the VI Ferrata legion commemorated on coins of the city at this time.¹⁴

The Roman walls of Damascus have over the past century been assumed to form a symmetrical rectangle with its north side immediately south of the Barada. While no in situ remains have been found to bear out this assumption (Wulzinger and Watzinger, Sauvaget), the hypothesis is broadly supported by the location of the city gates, though most have been heavily reconstructed from Roman blocks.¹⁵ The location of the Roman citadel or *castrum* has also long been debated, suggesting a probability that a Roman *castrum*, probably around 120 by 120 metres in extent, was located at the north-west corner of the city. While recent research has not yet provided firm archaeological evidence, the Hellenistic fortress cited in Josephus (see page 56) looked out over the hippodrome and the position could well have been upgraded in Roman times.¹⁶ Though southern Syria did not become a major source of recruits for the Roman army until the third or fourth century,¹⁷ Damascus would be a logical location for a military base of modest proportions. The city's supportive role was reinforced by the decision of Diocletian in the late third century to establish an armoury there, one of the five in the group of provinces listed under a new title, Oriens. This provided the basis of the city's arms industry, which became renowned through the Arab and Turkish centuries for its highly decorated swords and inlaid knives.

A Christian city

While Damascus may have given rise to the first Christian mission, the Christian community in Damascus remained small for the first two centuries. We have no evidence of any campaign against adherents until the empire-wide persecutions of the third century. The decisions of Constantine after 312 to endorse Christianity brought the first indications that the faith was flourishing in the city, though it is unlikely that Christians were a majority of the population before the mid-fourth century.¹⁸ In the countryside to the south, many areas remained partly pagan well into the fifth century. The prominent neo-Platonic philosopher Damascius, for example, was born in Damascus in 480 and educated there as a pagan before moving to Athens where his school was closed under Justinian after 529.¹⁹

Even when Christianity became the majority religion, however, it left few physical remains that survive. No church of the many in modern-day Damascus has identifiable remains going back to the late Roman or Byzantine period, with the possible exception of the chapel of Saint Ananias (page 89). We have a few isolated reminders, including the inscription added to the doorway leading into the Cathedral of Saint John (see page 113). One curious stone, which strikes the observant passer-by, is built into the wall of today's Umayyad Mosque, just before the southern wall meets the south-western tower. This low-relief stone stands out from the plain dressed masonry, looking for all the world like the torso of a statue with a hand thrust into a cloak: perhaps a saint; perhaps one of the temple benefactors.

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, half way along Straight Street, still occupies the ground on which Christian churches have stood as long as records reach back but there are no in situ remains of a Byzantine building. The churches on this site were frequent targets, for example, of the Mongols in 1400 and of the Muslim rioters in the troubles of 1860. The present church is largely nineteenth–twentieth century. Yet we know Damascus shared fully in the intensely Christian civilisation of the Byzantine age. It was a major centre headed by a bishop ranking immediately below the patriarch in Antioch. A bishop of Damascus attended the Council of Nicaea in 325.

We can surmise something of the layout of Byzantine Damascus as the location of many of its churches was noted in later Arab records. The urban plan remained basically unchanged from Roman times but the character of the city began to alter radically. It was once assumed that the open grid plan of the Greek-Roman city began to disappear with the Arab conquest. The lattice-work city with clear reference points, designed for ease of communication and conveying a sense of dramatic impact along its major axes, allegedly succumbed to an oriental tendency towards clutter and confusion. It is now more commonly argued, not without challenge, that this disintegration of the great Roman streetscapes began in the Byzantine period. City government had changed: notables were less beholden to governing bodies; building regulations fell into disuse. It was clearly a different kind of urban life compared with the more tightly regulated Roman city. Funds had to be diverted to defence and the perpetual wars on the frontiers. Less care was taken in the upkeep of the grand civic amenities. ‘The leading social group . . . was no more the idle gentry, but merchants and craftsmen’.²⁰ The Roman drive for straight lines, broad thoroughfares and grand perspectives lapsed when the emphasis was on sales and profits. The process of appropriating public spaces for private use quickened.

The church held great influence over city life, the bishop often more powerful than the governor and taking a greater interest in civic decisions. Though games and shows in the hippodrome may have continued, in spite of the church’s disapproval, facilities such as the gymnasium or the theatre represented more openly licentious pursuits no longer to be encouraged and were probably allowed to crumble. Some new works were undertaken but of a more practical, mundane rather than ornamental nature. The use of wheeled transport died out as the camel again became the prime means of goods transport. Streets once required to be wide enough for carts to pass could now be much narrower. The grand avenues were constricted by parasitic stalls that blocked the thoroughfare.

This turning inward is equally evident in the trend away from the spectacular. The use of the temple compound as the central religious focal point gave way to the proliferation of observance in neighbourhood churches, succeeding the house churches in which Christians had originally worshipped. People less often came from near and far to attend ceremonies. Every quarter, every village had its own church. The space and grandeur of the temple with its concentric courtyards for crowd handling became redundant as centres associated with the cult of saints

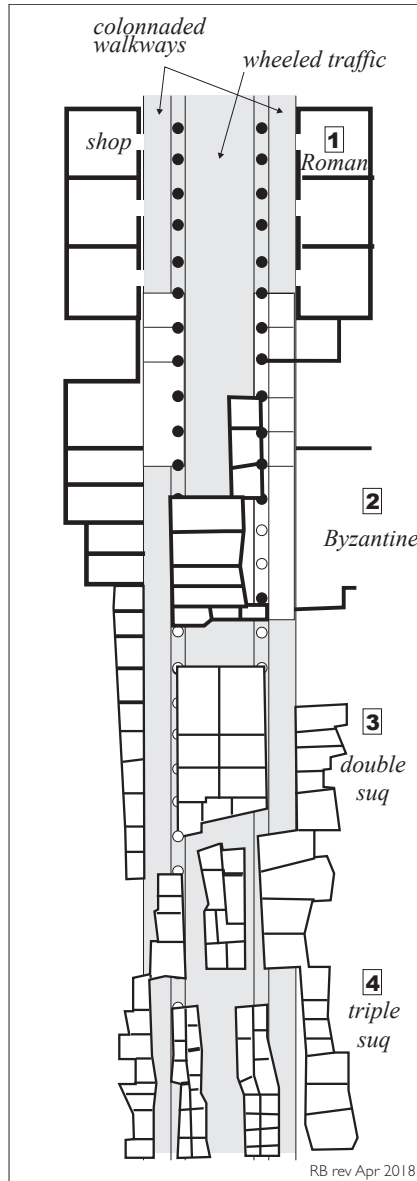


FIGURE 7.3 Roman *cardo* to Arab *suq*

Source: after Sauvaget 1935: fig. 8

began to flourish. The surroundings of the great *temenos* had become more distinctly commercial with the creation in late Roman and Byzantine times of an extensive shopping complex in the outer compound (*peribolos*), which was dubbed the Gamma as its shape resembled the Greek letter Γ. Arcaded halls spanned the

Gamma providing sheltered entrances to the *temenos* on three sides, dividing worshippers entering the church from the shopping precinct.²¹ Remains of the halls survive on both the western and the northern approaches to the Mosque. The gateway in the *peribolos* wall that provided a point of access to the new shopping precinct survives at the northern end of the Suq al-Hayyetin (tailors' *sug*). One segment of the *peribolos* complex, however, was appropriated for a different purpose. In the south-eastern corner of the outer enclosure a palace was built after 495 for the Byzantine governor of the Phoenice Libanensis province of which Damascus was the capital.²²

Cathedral of Saint John

We know that the *temenos* of the present Umayyad Mosque housed a cathedral described by a later visitor as 'having no equal in Syria',²³ but we know nothing about the shape, size or origin of the building. The church is attributed to the Emperor Theodosius in 391.²⁴ It is not even clear, however, which saint it originally honoured. While it later came to be associated with the legend that the head of Saint John the Baptist was buried there, this attribution began sometime after the late sixth century.²⁵ There was a tendency early last century to argue that the basilica plan of the present Mosque's prayer hall must have followed the shape and location of the Byzantine church. This assumption (propagated by Watzinger and Wulzinger) may have been partly influenced by the need to accommodate the legend of the burial of Saint John's head: a tale that now reeks of red herring. The assumption that the head would logically have been interred under the floor of the Christian church rather than in a separate martyrium is now also discredited since the remains of a Christian martyrium has recently been identified outside the eastern wall of the Homs Great Mosque. It is unlikely, moreover, that a church of such huge dimensions could have been constructed: it would have been the largest to date in Christendom, occupying half the internal dimensions of the *temenos*, that is, 50 by 136 metres.

What form the new church might have taken, however, is a mystery. Somewhat of a zealot in rooting out the old pagan practices, Theodosius, consistent with his edict of 380 enforcing the primacy of Christianity, put an end to pagan use of such enclosures. The conversion of pagan temples as Christian places of worship is a complex issue but most pagan temples did not lend themselves to easy conversion.²⁶ As the Christian liturgy brought the focus inside the building (as opposed to the Semitic-Roman practice of sacrifices visible to the faithful spread across the *temenos*), the existing *cella* could only accommodate a limited congregation. Moreover, temples were often designed with the entrance to the *cella* facing the rising sun; churches usually had their main entrance on the west with the liturgy, oriented towards the apse on the eastern side. The Jupiter temple *cella* was thus not a self-evident choice and there were, in any event, prejudices later reflected in formal edicts, forbidding the use as churches of buildings erected for pagan worship. If the *cella* could not simply become the church,

a new enclosed building would have to be built within the *temenos*. Possibly, the church was built inside a corner of the *temenos*,²⁷ oriented west from the shrine of Saint John – assuming, that is, that the shrine’s location is accurately preserved in the Ottoman structure over the alleged burial place of the saint’s head. There is, however, no obvious evidence of any changes to the walls of the *temenos* needed to accommodate a church in the south-western segment.²⁸

Theodosius had three inscriptions carved on the *temenos*’ southern entrance, the temple’s triple doorway originally built under Septimius Severus. The central triumphant message is clearly conveyed in an adaptation of Psalm 145.13: ‘Your kingship, O Christ, is a kingship forever; your reign lasts from age to age’. The Greek inscription is still visible over the blocked-up southern opening, all that survives to remind us of the Church of Saint John. It is likely that this became the major gateway leading to the church to make clear the break with the pagan tradition of entering from the east. The location of the doorway slightly to the east of the true centre of the south wall may support the assumption that the church was placed towards the western side of the *temenos*. The doorway was positioned to bring visitors into the *temenos* at a point that led directly to the church.²⁹

To glimpse what the Byzantine city might have been like, you need to turn elsewhere in the Damascus region. South of Damascus in the Hauran we find superb examples of the religious architecture of the times. Some, like the remarkable octagonal Church of Saint George at Ezra’a in the Hauran are still largely intact in the stolid form in which the new faith took pride. The Ezra’a church has been used for Christian worship for 15 centuries. As the inscription in Greek over its main doorway trumpets, it too replaced a pagan temple: ‘What was once an abode

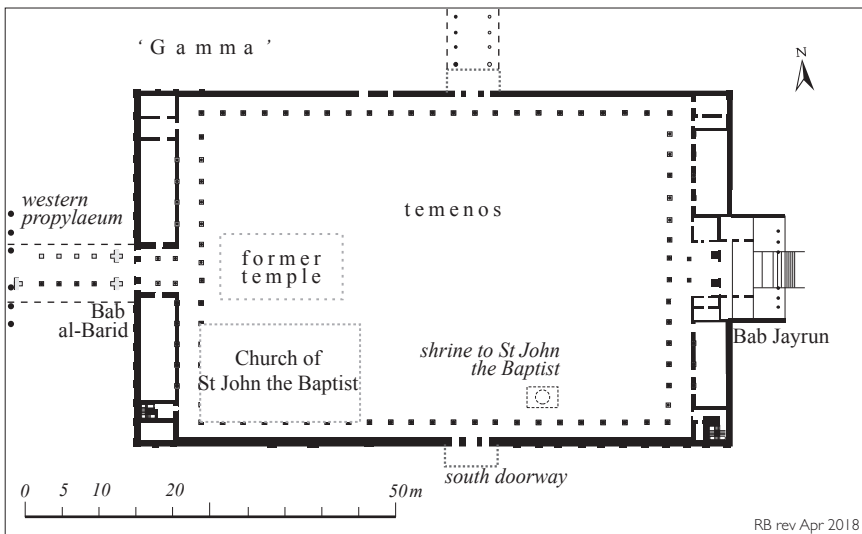


FIGURE 7.4 Byzantine Church of St John

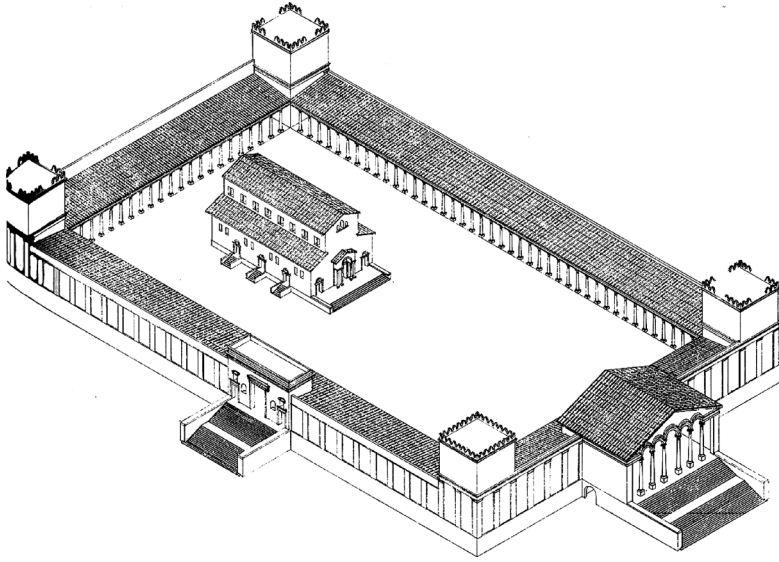


FIGURE 7.5 Creswell's hypothetical reconstruction of the *temenos* before the Muslim Conquest

Source: Creswell 1969: fig. 100³⁰

of demons has become a house of God'. Other churches are more richly decorated along classical lines. In the bustling town of Suweida are arresting remnants of the Byzantine cathedral dedicated to Saint Sergius: bits of the *narthex* and of the curved apse jammed bizarrely between roads and modern houses. The original building was huge in size, over 60 metres long. On a smaller scale, the little town of Qanawat, 30 kilometres north of Suweida preserves much of its Byzantine pilgrimage centre, converted from two Roman temples, including the paved square on which the throngs of pilgrims once assembled.

In the Qalamoun north of Damascus, a centre of Christian pilgrimage at Seidnaya provides a surviving early reflection of the Marian tradition. A little further north at Ma'alula, the beautiful little church of Saint Sergius gives an indication of the form of churches of the fourth or fifth century. At Yabrud (100 kilometres north of Damascus) the town's Byzantine church incorporates remains of the Temple to Jupiter Yabrudis.

Decline and disintegration

When the mid-fourth century emperor Julian (r.361–363) described Damascus as 'the eye of the whole East',³¹ he may have caught it just before its classic beauty passed its peak. While the thread of the Hellenic tradition remained unbroken in the Byzantine era, Damascus was facing what were clearly uncertain times. The brief reversion to paganism under Julian had encouraged the Jewish community

to set fire to the city's two basilicas,³² both of which must have predated the later Church of Saint John. Made the capital of its own province, Phoenice Libanensis (or Secunda), in the reforms of 395, the new honour only underlined increasing concerns at the security of the eastern frontiers, judging by the responsibilities outlined in the early-fifth-century list of officials, the *Notitia Dignitatum*. Damascus, presumably now the seat of the military official, the Dux Phoenicis, supervised territory extending in the west only as far as the northern Beqa'a. His main sphere of operation ballooned out to the east as far as Palmyra, also taking in Emesa. Already, Syria was facing its eastern and Semitic destiny. This, of course, had never been effaced by the Greek or Roman presence that had sought to smother the indigenous identity under a blanket of common culture and burgeoning prosperity. Now that times were tougher, now that the pressures on the empire itself were from the east, Syria could not ignore its own complex make-up.

The first manifestation was religious, befitting an age in which every theological nuance attracted as much controversy as stock market trends or football scores might today. Everyone seemed to have an opinion on a subject as esoteric as the comparative emphasis to be given to the divine and human natures of Christ, hardly something that would inspire popular discourse nowadays. In the fifth or sixth centuries, these were burning issues that were as much a debate over what licence should be given to the empire's eastern church to formulate its own interpretations of Christianity. Attempts to impose an obsessive form of orthodoxy only made the local churches with their largely Aramaic- (not Greek-) speaking adherents more resistant. The Nestorians had already been forced beyond the fringes of empire into Mesopotamia. Damascus was more directly infested with Monophysite opinion, adamantly opposed to the orthodoxy imposed from Constantinople following the Council of Chalcedon (451) which defined Christ as comprising two natures, human and divine. The emphasis on the composite nature of Christ was particularly strong in rural and semi-desert areas of Syria. A bishop of Damascus was among a large group expelled from their sees in 538 for adherence to Monophysitism.

There has recently been a lively scholarly debate on whether serious economic decline had already set in by the sixth century, well before the Islamic conquest. Serial Persian invasions and earthquakes may account for some decline, particularly in northern Syria, but a single explanation such as the bubonic plague of 540 is probably an overstatement.³³ Communities may have found it difficult to raise the manpower to get back on their feet. Towns, especially those dependent on international trade for their prosperity, fell on hard times. Imperial authority was waning and the benevolent hand of the administration was less evident. However, the pattern of urban change in the Byzantine eastern provinces is not at all uniform. In some areas, such as northern Syria, a decline began in the sixth century. By contrast, southern Syria and present-day Jordan appeared to flourish with the number of churches still expanding. Damascus was probably less exposed than the imperial mega-cities and could more easily fall back on its agricultural hinterlands: the perennially bountiful Ghouta, the northern Beqa'a and the Hauran. The smaller

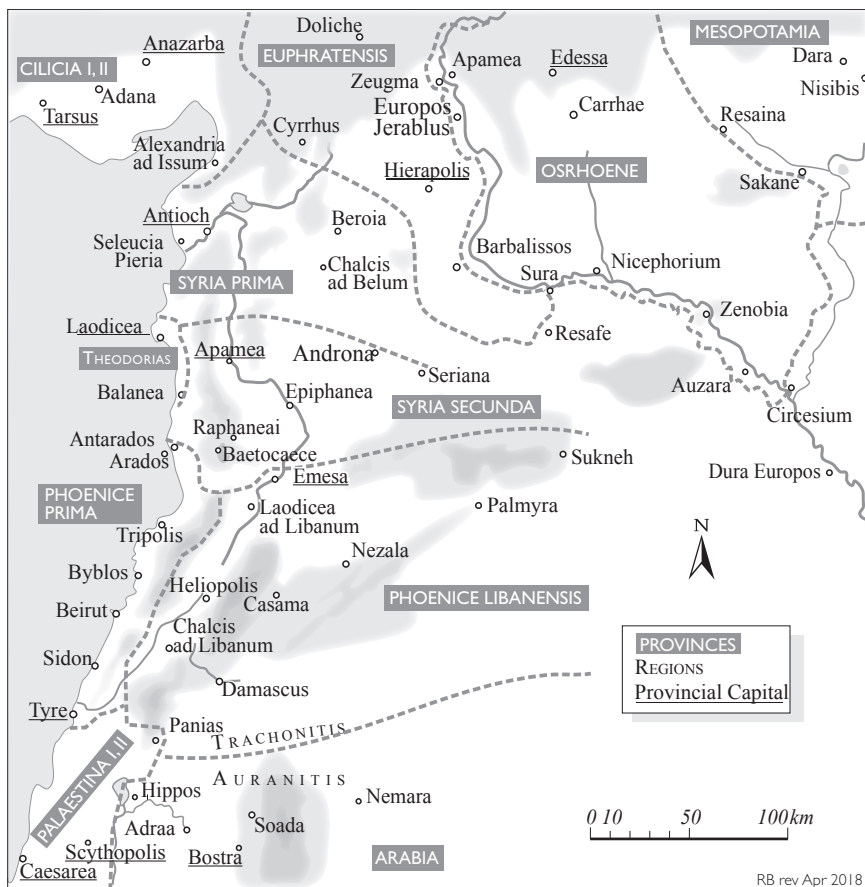


FIGURE 7.6 Roman/Byzantine provincial divisions, from late fourth century

cities and particularly the towns and villages of the countryside could survive by their own ingenuity. Much of southern Syria actually did survive and some areas even prospered.

Who were the Arabs?

The people who survived best these vicissitudes were the inhabitants of the spaces between the great empires, the Arabs. We have used the word ‘Arab’ already but the above account has not yet established who these people were: Where did they come from, to whom were they related? Essentially, they were the great survivors who moved between empires; sometimes on the fringes of Hellenised society, sometimes active participants in it.³⁴ Their milieu (not necessarily their ‘homeland’) was the great void of the Syrian and Arabian deserts from which various groups merged, infiltrated or intersected with settled populations

on the fringes.³⁵ So close were they linguistically to the traditional Aramaean population in Syria that the difference often seems somewhat academic. In times of stability, rural areas seemed to have been able to absorb considerable numbers of Arabs who began by visiting with their goats and sheep, seeking summer pasturage (as they still do) and later settled down as cultivators themselves. Damascus had always been an important centre for this interface between 'desert and sown', particularly due to its position as a junction point on the King's Highway. Some Arabs, as described above, benefited immensely from commerce, particularly the lucrative incense trade from Arabia with its outlet at Gaza on the Mediterranean, forming substantial states and urban centres of their own. Even the nomadic groups had been sufficiently structured (often under women rulers) to enter into tributary relationships with Syria's overlords such as the Assyrians. They had first encountered a European conventional force when Antigonos, one of Alexander's successors, sent his army against them in 312 BC.³⁶ Some of the groups which had always moved across the margins formed princely courts based on urban centres such as Emesa and Petra, the Greeks largely following a policy of 'live and let live'. By the time of Pompey's settlement, Damascus was virtually surrounded on all sides by Arab principalities: Ituraeans; Nabataeans; Emesenes; and the trading oligarchy at Palmyra.

In practice, relations between the Arabs and Rome were normally peaceful. It had long been appreciated that it was essential to keep on side with the Arabs given their control of the luxury trade across the Syrian wilderness. After the Augustan peace, before Zenobia, there is little evidence that the Arabs made any concerted attempt to challenge Rome's supremacy³⁷ even when Rome found it convenient to wind up the separate Arab principalities and establish direct rule. In the fourth century, the Arabs began to play roles as surrogates. 'After wearing down, taming, and absorbing the Arabs within the imperium, (Rome) enlisted them in her service to fight her wars', namely the strategic struggle between Rome and Persia.³⁸ Rome increasingly relied from the fourth century on local tribal chiefs to ensure the defence of rural communities. The practice of co-opting was consolidated in the sixth century with the formation of large Arab confederations.

What the nomadic Arabs lacked to give themselves greater clout was a stable political structure, though the Byzantines tried to win their loyalty by privileging those groups who converted to Christianity and whose leaders accepted appointments as '*duces*' in the Byzantine army's *limitanei* forces. The Arab princes concluded formal treaties with the Roman administration, renegotiated each time there was a change of ruler on either side. Many had by then adopted Christianity en masse. By the sixth century they grouped themselves in large confederations often aligned to a theological tendency such as Monophysitism. Essentially based on coalitions of tribal elders, however, the Arabs shifted in their loyalties depending on their local interests. Any power that ventured to extend its authority into the desert found itself playing in a very fluid situation with the Arabs increasingly exercising the freedom to treat as they would with both Rome and Persia.

'Do it yourself' defence doctrine

In the north, the great fortresses of the late fifth–sixth century defence line (many still stand grandly defying the centuries) had been upgraded to take the full force of a Persian thrust. By then, though, most of the rest of Syria to the south had been left to Arab confederates to defend, confident in the belief that the Persian horses could not be provisioned in a major invasion via the desert.³⁹

By the sixth century, the fixed strategic shield of Diocletian's era north-east of Damascus had long fallen into disuse, its remains left to crumble where they still stand like forgotten sentinels flanking the Palmyra road. The fate of Damascus was increasingly linked to the power of the Ghassanid Arab tribal federation whose role was vital for the pacification of the desert and to block any flanking move by Arab allies in support of the Sasanians. The Monophysite Ghassanids' relationship with the Byzantine administration was a troubled one. Though broadly loyal to the imperial authority (at least until 581 when their leader, al-Mundhir, was arrested and deported to Sicily),⁴⁰ they ran what was probably virtually a parallel administration in southern Syria. The post-581 breakdown was made irretrievable by the Byzantine attempts to reassert Constantinople's orthodoxy. It was probably more a matter of neither Arab nor Byzantine being on the same wavelength: the Byzantines believed in centralised authority and a world empire; the Arabs thought as tribal elders, prepared to do business with Byzantium but respecting the emperor as no more than another sheikh. With their subsidies to the Ghassanids, the Byzantine Empire had bought security but not undivided loyalty. When the relationship broke down, anarchy prevailed.

The Arab presence was particularly active in the Damascus area, the Ghassanids having established their forts as close as Dumeir (Thelseai) 40 kilometres to the north-east. They may well have had a residential base in Damascus, according to the Arab geographer, al-Ya'kubi, writing in the ninth century.⁴¹ They endowed monasteries nearby, both south of Damascus as well as beyond Dumeir at Nabk, Qaryatein and Qasr al-Heir al-Gharbi to the north. They may also have controlled the desert forts whose remains lie directly east of Damascus on the western edge of the Dirat al-Tulul wilderness: Deir Jenoubi, Deir Shemali and Tell Dekwa. Damascus was now increasingly hemmed in by the Arabs who were ultimately under no one's control. By the end of the sixth century, the grand imperial city was becoming a precarious Byzantine outpost. As Hugh Kennedy has put it: 'The work begun by the Ghassanids was completed, the next century, by the Umayyads'.⁴² Ironically, in this uncertain environment, the trade role of Damascus revived and it became perhaps the major terminus of the routes from Arabia in the sixth century. Much of the trade that had once arrived from the east via the Gulf now flowed up from the Red Sea. Other links to the south were strengthened. Christianity brought closer ties between Damascus and Jerusalem and the Decapolis town at Pella (on the eastern edge of the Jordan Valley, south of the Yarmuk River) played a new role as the intermediate point in a defensive axis linking the two cities.⁴³

Notes

- 1 Wheeler 1952: 112.
- 2 Millar 1987: 145.
- 3 The cross-desert trade via Palmyra began to decline markedly during the second century AD, increasing the importance of the northern route.
- 4 See especially Stoneman 1992.
- 5 Stoneman 1992: 158.
- 6 Poidebard 1934 I: 67–69.
- 7 Sartre 2001: 488 points out that the route from Palmyra to Sura on the Euphrates had been demarcated from AD 75 and that it must have complemented a pre-existing improved route from Damascus to Palmyra.
- 8 The issues in this and the following paragraphs are examined further in Burns 2003, 2016a.
- 9 Gracey 1981: 300.
- 10 Bauzou 1989: 211; 2000: 88; Butcher 2003: 416; Malalas 1986: XII 308.
- 11 Two excellent examples can still be seen not far from the modern highway to Palmyra. The one at Manqura, called by the Romans Vallis Alba (White Valley), still can be reached ten kilometres north of the Baghdad turn-off. A second, restored by the Syrian antiquities authorities, is at Khan al-Hallabat, 30 kilometres south-west of Palmyra.
- 12 On Danaba, Gracey 1981: 300; Greatrex 1997: 29; Isaac 1990: 163–171; Liebeschütz 1977: 488–489. Nasrallah 1956 mentions several small forts around Qara, Nabk but these probably only served as local watchtowers. Rey-Coquais 1994 envisaged Roman control of the Qalamoun initially established through assimilated local families.
- 13 Millar 1990: 316; Pollard 2000: 64.
- 14 Dabrowa 2012: 33. Pollard 2000: 64 links *colonia* status to the stationing of legionary *vexillations* in Damascus, Palmyra and Neapolis (Nablus in Palestine). The city of Philippopolis honouring the birthplace of the Emperor Philip (Shahba, 100 kilometres south of Damascus) was founded in 244 and may also have involved the settlement of veterans at an important nerve point controlling access in the region – Bauzou 1989: 217–218.
- 15 An exploratory survey along the southern city walls found no evidence of Roman material in situ, possibly because the medieval walls had been pushed south of the Roman alignment – Saad and Benech 2012: 6. Earlier Syrian digs to the east had found no evidence of pre-Islamic walls.
- 16 Weber 1993: 146 quoting Josephus 1999 13, 15, 1 (388). See also Hanisch 1992: 498; Watzinger 1944: 319. The excavations that followed the transfer of the Citadel to civilian control may well yield some fascinating information on one of the few spots in the city open to scientific excavation – a first report is given in Berthier 2001–02. First clues on possible classical remains – Leriche *et al.* 2002–03.
- 17 Pollard 2000: 124. See, however, Gracey 1981: 314 for an earlier unit, Cohors I Damascenorum.
- 18 Julian *Epistles* 114; Sartre 2001: 952; Trombley 2001 II: 317.
- 19 On Damascus' Damascene background, Athanassiadi 1999: 19–20.
- 20 Gawlikowski 1997: 349.
- 21 Sack 1989a: 16; Sack in Philipp and Schaebler 1998: 187. Wulzinger and Watzinger 1921: 95 believed that the arcades were the work of Heraclius. Freyberger argues that they are third century AD – Freyberger 1989: 83.
- 22 Akili 2009: 43 fig. 1–39 proposes an alternative position in the north-western corner of the *temenos*.
- 23 Pena 2000: 91, quoting Saint Eutychius.
- 24 The Irish clergyman, Josias Porter, writing in 1855 described an inscription in the name of Arcadius, Theodosius' son, on a stone found east of the Mosque. Later lost, the stone reportedly referred to the 'restoration' of the building, though it is not clear if it already functioned as a church. Porter 1855 I: 72.

- 25 The attribution to St John the Baptist had not been applied at the time of the Piacenza pilgrim's visit in 570 – King 1976: 27. The original dedication may have been to the father of the Baptist, Saint Zachariah, or a confusion with the separate church later dedicated to Saint John of Damascus. Both these options were reported by later visitors on the basis of Arab accounts – see King 1976: 28; Pococke 1745 II i: 121. There is, certainly, plenty of competition for the claim to have Saint John's head and both Christian and Muslims enthusiastically promote the popular legend. For accounts of the burial of John the Baptist's body at Sebaste in Palestine see Pringle 1998: 283–288. Jalabert 2001: 16 n.2 also notes the possible transfer of the Saint John legend from Homs to Damascus.
- 26 Deichmann 1939: 114; Caillet 1996: 202.
- 27 As happened at Hama in 350–400 – see Riis 1965: 48.
- 28 For the best reconstruction of how the church fitted into the pagan *temenos* – Akili 2009: figs 1–35 and 1–36. Whether churches could be constructed within or on the site of temples is a vexed issue on which the jury is still out. The prevalent view is that the church, backed after 399 by the state, did not allow the use of *cellae* as churches unless the building material was re-used in different form. However, local practice was also a factor and many of the more fanatical acts of destruction of temples were due to local zealotry (see the celebrated example of Gaza – Humbert 2000; Trombley 2001 I: 207–223). After the initial enthusiasm behind ending pagan practices had run its course, the church in the late fifth and sixth centuries allowed the use of temple structures that had fallen into disuse. In the Damascus area, the Yabrud (see below) and Palmyra (Bel) temple *cellae* were converted for use as churches.
 If the conversion of the Damascus temple dates to the early phase of zealotry under Theodosius, it seems more likely that the *cella* was destroyed and replaced though whether on the same spot is impossible to say. (Milojevic 1996 points out that statistically, reuse of the *cella* happened in only 83 out of 300 recorded examples of Byzantine appropriation of pagan temples.) For the ongoing debate on the issue – Libanius *Orations* vol 1 'On Temples' – Norman 1977: 92–151; Caillet 1996; Deichmann 1939; Hanson 1978; Saradi-Mendelovici 1990; Liebeschuetz 2001; Trombley 2001; Guidetti 2016.
- 29 An odd reminder of the church may survive in parchment documents now in Berlin, transferred there in 1905 after the 1893 fire in the Great Mosque. These consist of leaves of a Christian Psalter, still surviving in the Mosque at the end of the nineteenth century, probably originally stored for reuse by Islamic scholars before the use of parchment died out in the Arab Middle Ages with the introduction of paper from China. The Christian text could be scraped off and the parchment reused. Sourdél and Sourdél-Thomine 1965: 85.
- 30 Since Creswell's study of the building in the 1920s, further research favours the likely positioning of the church in the southwest corner of the *temenos* as there is no indication of any structure placed on top of the foundations of the Roman inner shrine – see the important paper by Bounni 2004: 595–605.
- 31 Julian *Epistles* xxiv – see footnote 50 to Chapter 6.
- 32 Jalabert 1920: 125; Nasrallah 1944: 57 – quoting Saint Ambrose *Epistles* XL, 15; P L, t xvi col. 1154.
- 33 Kennedy 1985; Treadgold 1997: 275; disputed by Foss 1997: 261; Gawlikowski 1997: 349.
- 34 Retsö 1991: 209. The question is examined in detail in Retsö 2003.
- 35 Gawlikowski 1997: 41 rightly dismisses the old assumption that the Arabs emerged 'from the depths of Arabia'. The first recorded mention of the Arabs is in the ninth century BC as part of the coalition that Damascus raised against the Assyrians – David and DeGeorge 2002: 34; Retsö 2003: 127. Wherever their gene pool was located, the deserts of Syria–Arabia were their domain when the historical record opens.
- 36 Classical sources (including Plutarch *Alexander* 24.6) record that 'Arabs' had earlier harassed Alexander's forces from the rear during his siege of Tyre in 332, requiring a punitive expedition into the Anti-Lebanon (presumably against the Ituraeans) – Butcher 2003: 285–90; Retsö 2003: 264; Sartre 2001: 78.

- 37 Sartre 2001: 790; Shahid 1984a: 17–19.
- 38 Shahid 1984a: 27.
- 39 The issues of the Byzantine frontier are examined further in Burns 2011.
- 40 ‘Ghassan’ in *EL2*; Frend 1972: 330; Peters 1999: xxii.
- 41 Ya‘kubi (trans. Wiet) 1937: 173.
- 42 Kennedy 1985: 181.
- 43 Shboul and Walmsley 1998: 282, 284.

8

'FAREWELL OH SYRIA' (611–661)

In 610 a new emperor, Heraclius, came reluctantly to the throne at the age of 36. His disinclination to take on the job reflected the challenges the Byzantine Empire faced on several fronts. Things might have been grim at the beginning of his reign but by the end, 30 years later, they were much grimmer and he died a broken man. On all of the empire's frontiers, he faced daunting challenges but the east was to deliver the worst catalogue of disasters. A year after his succession, the Persians had already sliced right through the eastern provinces and taken Antioch: the disaster scenario which Byzantium's hugely expensive shield of forts and *limes* stretching 600 kilometres to the Khabur River in Syria's north-east was supposed to have prevented. This time it was no summer raid but a determined occupation and the rest of Syria quickly fell into Persian hands. The Sasanian King of Kings, Chosroes II, even took Alexandria in 619, finally realising the Persian obsession with rolling back the conquests of Alexander.¹

Though Ghassanid solidarity had begun to break up well before the 612 invasion, the pro-Persian sympathies of many Ghassanids at least blunted the hostility of the invaders and the full intensity of their onslaught was reserved for the imperial strongpoints in the north, particularly Antioch. Damascus was taken in 612. Though never as unswerving in its allegiance to the Monophysite church as other parts of Syria had been, the Ghassanid influence had strengthened Damascus' sympathy for the anti-Orthodox (Chalcedonian) cause. Recent experience had convinced many Syrians that 'a foreign overlord was not necessarily a persecutor, but a Chalcedonian nearly always was'.² The city had been indifferent or hostile enough towards Constantinople to ensure that the Persians treated Damascus comparatively well. Though the occupation was unpopular and some Damascenes were deported by the Persians, it was spared the sacking that overtook Jerusalem, for example, two years later. Trade between Damascus and Arabia continued to flourish during this period, during which the Prophet Muhammad was bringing

Islam to the Hijaz. Overall, though, the Persian occupation fatally weakened the Byzantine hold over Syria, probably depleted the local Byzantine aristocracy and prepared the way for the later Islamic armies.

Though Damascus may have suffered less gratuitous damage than other centres, its economy was weakened, its administration swept away in the decade of Sasanian subjugation. It was not until 622 that the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius could begin the long campaign to reimpose his authority. It was 628 before Damascus was back in Byzantine hands, having been evacuated the previous year by the Persians. Peace with Persia was signed the next year. The Christian churches had not been singled out for persecution by the Persians but Heraclius made the restoration of Christian orthodoxy a rallying point of his campaign, though he was also prepared to back a last-minute attempt to present a compromise theological formula. In 630, the emperor travelled to Hierapolis (Menbij) in northern Syria to receive the relics of the True Cross the Sasanians had taken from Jerusalem. The next year, he ceremonially returned the remains to Jerusalem.

This new propaganda gesture was not enough to turn back the clock, particularly as it was accompanied by a return to impose rigid orthodoxy. The imperial presence had lost its allure. The empire was exhausted and, in its eastern provinces, fatally discredited. In the same year that Heraclius reinstated the relics of the Cross in Constantine's great Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, new historical forces were gathering strength in the northern Hijaz. Muhammad, and the followers of the new revealed creed, captured the traditional Arab cult centre, Mecca. The supporters had their own rallying point, the pristine simplicity of Islam. The idea had been implanted ten years earlier. In 622, the year Heraclius began his arduous campaign to drive the Persians out, Muhammad was making his *hijra* or emigration from Mecca to Medina. This became year one of the Muslim calendar. In Medina he had the freedom to establish his new community (*umma*), providing a firm base from which to spread his message. At first, the mission was concentrated on spreading the faith among the pagan tribes of Arabia, those untouched by the other great monotheistic faiths. The Arabs of Christian or Jewish adhesion, being 'people of the Book (Bible)', were not the first preoccupation.

Heraclius stayed on in the provinces of Oriens after 630, preoccupied by the difficulties of settling the region's affairs, especially its fractious ecclesiastical disputes. Even if Heraclius had been aware of the forces that were gathering deep in the south, it is unlikely that they greatly distracted him before 634, the year of the first clash between Byzantine and Muslim forces. Mu'ta, a Byzantine outpost in southern Jordan, east of the Dead Sea, had been attacked as early as 629 but this was dismissed as no more than the work of tribal raiders. The vast spaces of Arabia were beyond Heraclius' territorial reach and there had been no sign that the Muslim forces were bent on an ideological or religious confrontation. In the next year, however, some Christian communities near Aqaba went over to the Muslims, apparently spontaneously, without any reaction from the Byzantines.

Less than two years after Heraclius' triumphal return to Jerusalem, Muhammad died in Medina (632). His followers had already been instilled with a wider sense of

mission, an impulsion to spread the new faith beyond Arabia, but their first priority was to maintain the loyalty of the converts among the Arab tribes. Muhammad in his early years as a trader had probably ventured to Bosra and perhaps even Damascus. Possibly because of the flourishing trade links with southern Syria, he had made securing access to the area an important goal of his efforts to isolate Mecca, which had fallen to him in 630. Traditionally, many tribes in the northern Hijaz had had frequent contact with the Nabataeans and the Byzantine world. Some had even adopted Christianity or were influenced by the Christian ascetic movement in their midst. If Islam was to extend its horizons, the north was the natural direction in which it would direct its gaze. A concerted push into Syria was also the obvious distraction to stop the fractious tribesmen reverting to inter-tribal feuding which could undermine all Muhammad had achieved. The Arabs almost certainly only had the haziest idea of the two empires, Byzantine and Sasanian, to their north and the last thing on their mind initially was to destroy them, but once they found their frontier raids met little resistance, momentum built up.

Until the new Muslim leadership began to coordinate and concentrate the energies of the tribes, Heraclius remained understandably preoccupied elsewhere, reasserting Byzantine authority in the towns and settled areas and restoring orthodoxy. Like most states, the Byzantines were intent on fighting the next war based on their experience of the last. As we have seen, the empire's defence doctrine envisaged either a full-scale threat from Persia via the north or sporadic incursions from disaffected Arab tribes, pinpricks that could be handled by local garrisons. It did not anticipate the nomadic pinpricks suddenly swelling to the proportions of a major threat. It was a strategic miscalculation of breathtaking proportions.

In the first phase of the Islamic penetration, scouting groups may have reached southern Syria as early as 632, the year of Muhammad's death, finding allies among the Arab tribes, probing weak points and gathering intelligence. Various Arab forces were sent in after 633 by the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, to make contact with the nomadic populations of Palestine and the old Roman province of Arabia. The aim was initially limited to ensuring that the Byzantines did not regain the upper hand among the nomadic Arab tribes. The Byzantines were too stretched reasserting their authority in the towns to take much notice. Before long, the Muslims were probably effectively in control of much of the countryside, avoiding the towns and any major engagements with Byzantine forces.

Damascus – the first bulwark

A second phase of the Islamic penetration opened in 634 with the arrival in southern Syria (via Iraq) of an armed group commanded by the great Arab general, Khalid ibn al-Walid.³ Khalid's presence meshed the disparate Arab groups and provided a disciplined force around which they could rally. Thus emboldened, the Arabs ventured on a series of major engagements between Muslim and Byzantine forces, the exact sequence of which is still confused by a proliferation of often contradictory accounts. The Byzantine strategy was to be fatally undermined when the

Arab forces came together in field army strength. Even Antioch, the great capital of the cluster of provinces grouped as Oriens, would fall with barely a struggle under the impact of the Arab momentum.

Damascus was a natural objective of the first armies of Islam. To the Arabs it was the first major port for travellers from the desert, the great oasis straddling the Mediterranean and Semitic worlds. Damascus was also one of the fixed points supporting the defensive shield which the Byzantines hastily erected in southern Syria, with Jerusalem as the southern bastion. Heraclius had appointed special commanders to hold the towns, the pivots of his defensive strategy. Disenchanted though they might be, the cities stayed with Byzantium, unlike the Arab-dominated countryside. Damascus in itself proved to be no pushover. The Arab armies needed three attempts to take the city, a more prolonged struggle than for any of the other major towns of southern Syria or Palestine.

In this phase of more concerted Arab expansion challenging Byzantine control of major cities, Bosra had been the first city in Syria to fall (May 634). The major battles began soon after: at Ajnadayn in southern Palestine (July 634) and at Fahl (Pella, December 634). With the fall of Pella, the Byzantines' Damascus-Jerusalem shield was fatally weakened, gradually opening the way for what followed.

The pressures on Damascus then increased relentlessly. After his arduous 18-day forced march across the great desert from Iraq, Khalid ibn al-Walid was now playing a key role in the conquest, approaching Damascus in April 634 with a flourish. He came, probably via Palmyra, making the dramatic descent down the cascading escarpments that border the central Syrian steppe. Just before the threshold of the city, at Thaniyat al-'Uqla (Eagle's Pass) under Jebel Abu Attar, he planted the green flag of Islam to signal to the people of Damascus that now was the time to rally to a new cause.⁴

The Damascenes were initially unimpressed. Khalid's forces were at that stage small (possibly no more than 1,000) before reinforcements were sent from the Hijaz. Khalid's forces could only skirt around the city, raiding the Ghouta in the process before engaging the Byzantine and Ghassanid forces 30 kilometres south of Damascus at Marj al-Suffar. It was another year, well after the initial set-piece battles between Arab and Byzantine forces at Ajnadayn and Pella, before the Muslim armies seriously pressed Damascus. The Byzantine senior official in Damascus, Mansur ibn Sarjun, an Arab by origin, in the meantime had sought reinforcements from the Byzantine garrison at Homs.

The army of Khalid ibn al-Walid, as part of the collective forces under the Arab supreme commander, Abu 'Ubayda, had begun preparations to lay siege to Damascus in March 635. They occupied the Ghouta and appropriated its supplies while the inhabitants of the city held out against impossible odds for six months. While the exact details are lost in a thicket of legends, Arab accounts (now heavily discounted)⁵ relate that just as the citizens of Damascus finally agreed to allow Khalid ibn al-Walid's army to enter from the east, Abu 'Ubayda forcefully broke through one of the western gates, Bab al-Jabiya. The two Arab armies met somewhere along the central stretch of Straight Street. The date was September 635.

Resistance by Damascus had been sustained not so much by imperial forces but through 'a tenacious loyalty on the part of the people to their native (city)',⁶ led in the case of Damascus by their bishop who had befriended Khalid at the beginning of the siege. Once it was clear that resistance was useless, the surrender of the city was negotiated by Mansur ibn Sarjun⁷ or possibly the bishop.

In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful. This is what Khalid would grant to the inhabitants of Damascus, if he enters therein: he promises to give them security for their lives, property and churches. Their city wall shall not be demolished; neither shall any Moslem be quartered in their houses. Thereunto we give to them the pact of Allah and the protection of his Prophet, the Caliphs and the 'Believers'.⁸

The simultaneous entry of the two armies under different auspices was to lead to confusion as to whether the city had surrendered to the Muslims or had been taken by force. Under Muslim law, this flowed through to the privileges accorded to the Christian community. A community that surrendered could retain its churches, one that resisted to the end lost all rights.

The great field army perishes

The fall of a city enjoying the prestige of Damascus rang alarm bells in the Byzantine world. Heraclius had already decided on a major attempt to wrest back Syria. He could no longer leave the job to ineffective local garrisons and depleted units. It took, however, some time to assemble a new field army of 50,000.⁹ The forces of the Byzantine heartland were so wasted that Heraclius had to press Armenian and Ghassanid allies to provide much of the manpower, perhaps too disparate and divided a force to sustain a decisive show of strength. Certainly the force was weak in the proportion of mounted forces (*cataphracts*, perhaps only 20 per cent), traditionally the core of any Byzantine field army. Unusually the emperor played no direct role in command and waited at Homs or Antioch. Supreme command was handed to Theodoros Trithourios, probably a eunuch who had been serving as Byzantine treasurer. Field command was in the hands of Baanes (or Vardan), a professional soldier of Armenian origin. Byzantine strategic doctrine required a commander to avoid a costly fixed engagement and rely on the fortified towns holding out. Theodoros, perhaps not surprisingly, abandoned doctrine once the towns themselves began to topple. He possibly assumed that the Byzantines still possessed overwhelming superiority in numbers and imagined the rag-tag Arab armies to present a lesser threat than the sophisticated Persians. Caliph Abu Bakr played to Trithourios' mindset with a psychological strategy that exploited these prejudices. He gradually lured the Byzantines into a set-piece engagement in which they were tempted to believe they could wield the hammer of a disciplined imperial army to destroy the motley forces of the nomads.

With the arrival in southern Syria of this major Byzantine force, the Muslims abandoned Damascus in spring 636 and consolidated in the south to take up the challenge. The Byzantine strategy was to restore the Damascus-Jerusalem axis.

With the loss of Pella, it became essential to block access to Syria from the south through the Dera'a gap, lying between the gorges of the Yarmuk on the west and the lava fields and slopes of the Jebel Hauran to the east. The town of Dera'a on the present-day Syrian–Jordanian border has traditionally controlled this southern doorway to Syria. The Byzantine army was positioned behind the town to prevent a major Arab army from consolidating their opportunistic gains inside Syria. The Byzantines set up their base camp immediately west of the present-day United Nations zone on the Golan at the location called by the Arabs Yaqusa (deep ravine), almost half way between Jerusalem and Damascus.

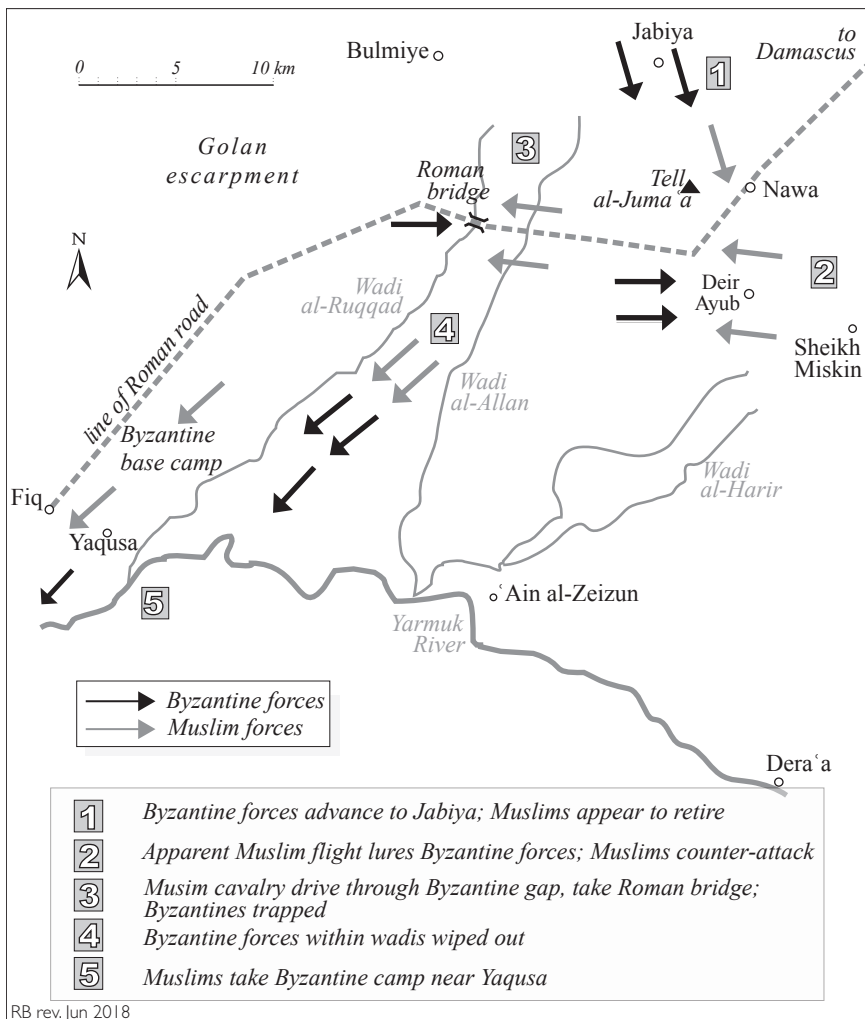


FIGURE 8.1 Battle of Yarmuk, August 636

To the south, though, they were hemmed in by the Yarmuk, the river which today forms part of the border between Syria and Jordan.

Arab aims

The Arabs numbered probably not much more than half the Byzantines' strength, maybe less than 30,000.¹⁰ They had assembled south of the Dera'a gap and in the long months of confrontation had gradually edged north of the town, penning the Byzantine force into the scarred plateau country between the Yarmuk and Lake Tiberias. In the final three months when the forces settled into an indecisive confrontation, the Byzantines still assumed, on the basis of their overwhelmingly greater numbers, that any confrontation could be launched on their terms. With their well-protected lines of supply looping north to Damascus, the Byzantines had felt no compulsion to take the initiative. Finally, however, alarmed by the realisation that their freedom to manoeuvre was becoming severely constricted and by signs of a major replenishment of the Muslim forces from the south, the great army lined up in battle formation on 15 August. The field army proved too disparate and its leadership too indecisive to be able to form a strategic hammer and the battle was not to be on the Byzantines' terms. Instead of finding ground on which the imperial forces could manoeuvre to drive the Arab bands south of the Dera'a gap, shutting them permanently out of Syria, it found itself lured into a trap masterfully set and sprung.

The Byzantines were strung out along a front up to 13 kilometres long south of the hamlet of Jabiya, six kilometres north of the provincial town of Nawa. Jabiya, with its excellent seasonal pasturage, had become something of a cult centre for the Ghassanids, dedicated to Saint Sergius.¹¹ The area certainly commanded access between Jerusalem and Damascus and between the Hijaz and Syria but it is doubtful if the Byzantines were well served by their Ghassanid allies in the choice of this particular terrain. The key role of the Ghassanids is illustrated by the fact that they had convinced Trithourios that this area, albeit central to their interests, was also a suitable point of concentration. In fact, the presence in Nawa of disaffected Jewish communities, who had fled Byzantine persecution in Jerusalem and were probably only too pleased to supply intelligence to the Arabs, was a fatal disadvantage. The choice of ground was even more bizarre given that while its strategic importance had been demonstrated in the great battle in 614 (in which an earlier Byzantine army lost to the Persians near Dera'a) so too had its tactical pitfalls, namely the broken terrain which leads south to the deep ravine of the Yarmuk as it gouges its way down to the Jordan to the west. The Byzantine base camp remained at Yaqusa in what seemed an impregnable position with deep ravines protecting it on two sides. While this logic was fine if the Byzantines could maintain an offensive posture, once the Arabs cut off their escape, the cleft countryside became a terrible killing field.

Overall command on the Arab side was in the hands of Abu 'Ubayda, a man known more for his piety than his military skills but the forces under him were

led by several gifted commanders including the brilliant but unorthodox (in every sense) Khalid ibn al-Walid. The Arabs must also have been familiar with the terrain but were less tied down by fixed formation doctrine. They were, however, eager to take on the Byzantines in a major battle.

There seem to have been two decisive encounters in the long (perhaps six-day) course of the final battle. After two days of indecisive engagements along the fixed front, the Byzantines managed to push through to the Arab base camp north of Dera'a on at least two occasions. Here they found themselves drawn into a *mêlée* in which the Byzantine cavalry came out second best. The Arabs were able to lure the unwieldy Byzantine forces into their encampment where amidst the tents, stores and pack animals, the Arab women participated eagerly in the fray, picking off many of the confused enemy. The second critical event was perhaps a day later, on 20 August,¹² when Khalid ibn al-Walid lured the Byzantine cavalry to the north, opening a gap between the cavalry and the northern flank of the Christian infantry. A squadron of Muslim horsemen penetrated the gap and took the Roman bridge at Jisr al-Ruqqad, cutting the Byzantines off from their base camp. The Christian Arab forces were the first to scatter northwards, quick to recognise the trap into which the Byzantines were about to be drawn.

On the sixth and final day of the battle, an Arab flanking movement saw the main Byzantine frontline caught by an action resembling a drawstring suddenly closing the mouth of a bag. The Arabs drove the huge imperial army, perhaps disoriented by a fortuitous dust storm, away from the relatively open plateau into the country between the ravines heading south and west. The main army and the remnants from the base camp found themselves confined to two long promontories. The Byzantine forces were annihilated. Many were simply driven over the steep, canyon-like walls that mark this bleak countryside. The Byzantine remnants that managed to flee did not rally to the colours again until they reached Homs.

Heraclius retreats

Heraclius, still at Homs, decided to conserve what remained of his army and trudged north, abandoning the rest of Syria without a struggle. 'He gave up the cause for lost . . . his life's work collapsed before his eyes'.¹³ It would have been impossible to have raised another army for a new stand and a second reconquest of Syria. He had learnt a terrible lesson. 'Farewell oh Syria' were his parting words as he looked back. 'And what an excellent country this is for the enemy', immortalising in the bitterness and frustration of this phrase all the difficulties which Byzantium had faced in sustaining Hellenised society in such a fluid environment as Syria had become.¹⁴ Heraclius survived another five years on the throne but the lustre of his triumph against the Persians had gone, his last days dogged by a nervous disorder that signalled the steady breakdown of his health. On that journey home from Syria he probably passed via Edessa and Osrhoene in order to consolidate the Armenian-populated eastern reaches of Asia Minor as a bastion against the Muslims to the south. He balked at the final crossing of the Bosphorus, fear of

water causing him to linger for weeks in his palace at Hiereia until a way could be found to induce him to cross by a bridge of boats hedged with tree branches. 'No Byzantine emperor experienced such a great spread between success and failure in the same reign'. Yet he managed to stabilise what remained of the empire. His military and administrative restructuring, conferring a more distinctly Hellenised identity, may have facilitated its survival for many centuries in its truncated form.¹⁵

The armies of Islam, having gathered at Jabiya to consider their plans, could now converge on Damascus. Heraclius had made no move to strengthen further its defences; it was left to its fate. The remnants of the Byzantine army had either slipped back over the Taurus or escaped via Egypt. In December 636, Damascus received back the Muslims on the same terms that had been agreed in 635. Though it was another three years before the last Byzantine garrisons would leave Syria, the remaining forces were capable only of sporadic defence of some of the remaining Byzantine towns of northern Syria and Palestine. By 638, the entire province once proudly designated Syria by its first Roman conquerors 700 years before had gone. Jerusalem was in Muslim hands by 638, its surrender received by the new Caliph, 'Umar. Antioch itself, the great capital of Oriens, also fell in 638 with little resistance. By 640, the entire coast was in Muslim hands.

Why did Syria fall? 'The Lord abandoned the army of the Romans as a punishment for their corrupt faith' went the popular explanation.¹⁶ The overwhelming reason, which took some time to play out, was that the population had no interest in another prolonged war. In the face of that indifference, the Byzantines eventually saw little point in further campaigning. Moreover, their army was simply less cohesive in its composition than the Arabs, who made brilliant use of cavalry. Byzantium had really lost Syria over 20 years before. It had failed to regain the hearts and minds of the Syrians when its reconquest brought no reconciliation with the Semitic population who in the meantime had experienced the Sasanians' tolerance of Monophysitism. With the Byzantines' return and the restoration of orthodoxy, the Syrians sullenly resented the arrogance and insensitivity of their old masters.

For the 700 years of Roman-Byzantine rule and the 300 years of Greek control that had gone before it, Syria had embraced a Mediterranean destiny. During that millennium the Hellenic tradition had seeped to varying degrees into its towns and villages, even if, in the last 200 or so years, the Semitic tradition had again become resurgent and the trade that had tied Syria to the Mediterranean had slackened. That continual tussle between the Hellenic west and the Semitic east had moved back and forth, giving to Syria a rich and many-layered sense of identity. Now, as the emperor returned to the fastness of Byzantium, the 1,000 year Syrian experiment with Hellenism ebbed like a tide turning, sucked back into the sea whence it had come.

Arab administration

The transition in Damascus, though, was a relatively gentle one. The Arab presence was initially modest; the destruction throughout Syria negligible compared

with that suffered under the Sasanians 25 years before. The influx of new Arabs was limited, restricted initially perhaps to some veterans of the victorious armies. Damascus was not handed over to nomadic Arabs. The Muslim forces were elite groups (perhaps 30,000 only in the force at Yarmuk as we saw above), not waves of settlers on the move. Most of the troops who took the city did not remain to garrison it; the forces under Khalid ibn al-Walid, for example, returned to Iraq while the main army went on to northern Syria.

While many high officials of the Byzantine regime or those with portable wealth left, there was no mass evacuation. (Many officials may have already left before Yarmuk. They remained with Heraclius in Homs or Antioch and joined him in the retreat to Byzantium.) There was no physical destruction or dismantling of buildings associated with the Byzantines or Christianity. The base Aramaean-Arab population stock remained in place. They had, of course, nowhere to go and probably felt that they had more in common with the new Arab rulers than with the Greek overlords. A number of Syrian high officials who had worked for the Byzantines felt they had nothing to fear. For example, Mansur ibn Sarjun, the high official in the Byzantine finance department who had stepped in to command the city when the Byzantine governor had fled in 635, remained at his post and gave rise to a line of Christian officials and counsellors.¹⁷ The most illustrious was his grandson, Saint John of Damascus (c.652–c.749) who may have also served briefly in the caliphal finance department until the early years of Hisham (r.724–43) before deciding to spend his last years as a monk in the Monastery of Saint Saba (Palestine).¹⁸ His life illustrated the manner in which prominent Damascene Arabs were increasingly stranded between two worlds and John was wary of the increasing pressures to convert to Islam. Among his writings were dialogues for the rightful guidance of Christians in debating with Muslims and nuanced views which attracted criticism in Orthodox circles on the best way to approach the followers of Monophysitism.

The second reason why we cannot speak of an 'Arab invasion' was that the Arabs were already there. Damascus was probably a city in which Arabs already felt at home and those who had moved into the settled areas already formed a majority in many parts of southern Syria by the sixth century. In contrast to the Arab settlements near what would later become Cairo and in southern Iraq, in Syria new cities were on the whole avoided. Little fresh colonisation was needed. Early plans to establish a permanent city at Jabiya, the Ghassanid centre that had been the magnet for the Battle of Yarmuk and the site of the first conference (638) of the Muslim leadership on Syrian soil, were abandoned when the Arabs preferred accommodation in or near existing towns, for example Deraya, taking the places of citizens who had fled.¹⁹ Some local Arab tribes who converted in the early stages to Islam may have used their favoured status to settle on agricultural land but there was no sponsored system of settlement as there was in contemporary Iraq.

Christians remained the great bulk of the population, probably for several centuries. Political divisions now reinforced the great gulf between Monophysites and Orthodox. Most of those caught on the Arab side of the frontiers were

Monophysites. The Orthodox continued to maintain links to Constantinople in spite of intense difficulties but the eastern churches were stranded in the face of the rising tide of Islamic allegiance. Many in effect withered from a theological perspective and lost their capacity to guide their followers in the face of the Islamic challenge. 'Monophysitism gradually became a religion of survival only'.²⁰

Conversion, however, was initially a slow process. In the seventh century, the Muslim population came largely from the slow influx of officials and army personnel. A number of scholars of the new faith also sought to be close to the new centre of power or were bidden by the Caliphs to advance Koranic studies, perhaps partly to ensure that no separate tradition implanted itself in Medina.²¹ Certainly, there were no reprisals or pressure on civilian Christians to convert; indeed the new rulers initially regarded their religion as a privilege reserved for themselves. In exchange for rendering military service, Muslims were exempt from some taxes and conversion deprived the rulers of a major source of revenue. Conversion also resulted in ostracism by both old and new co-religionists. Only in Iran was mass conversion (from Zoroastrianism) a phenomenon of the early Islamic period. The first addition en masse to the Islamic community probably came from ethnic Arabs who drifted towards Damascus from rural or nomadic areas, thus losing in the process the stigma that came in the eyes of their fellow Christians.²²

Compared with some of the takeovers of power in the modern world, it was a restrained, humane affair. There was no centralised administration; each local governor used his own initiative and reflected local custom. The emphasis was on continuity in administration. The taxes on the Christians were a burden but probably no more onerous than what the Byzantines had exacted. The principles of taxation were set out in response to the two-level system stipulated in the Koran: eventually this would mean that all citizens paid land tax (*kharaḡ*) but Christians were obliged to pay an additional tribute (*jizya*) in return for exemption from military service. According to a later account, the Muslims imposed some specific terms:

[Christians] must not curse a Muslim or beat him, nor raise a cross in a meeting place of Muslims, nor take a pig out from their houses into the courtyards of Muslims . . . [nor] beat their wooden clappers before the prayer call of the Muslims, nor at the time of their prayers, nor take out banners on the days of their holidays.²³

In spite of these restraints on the public display of Christian symbols, the church felt under no particular threat. Indeed many local Christians might have sighed with relief at the removal of the Byzantine pressures on the Monophysite church. There is no archaeological evidence of any damage to Christian churches in this period. New churches continued to be built; others were redecorated using the classical canon as adapted to Christian use.²⁴

While the causes of the Islamic move out of the Hijaz will long be debated, the tendency to see it as a mass migration driven by population pressure is long behind us. Why did the Arab occupiers handle Syria somewhat differently from the

more conscious repopulation of parts of Iraq? In Damascus, the Arab leadership did not see the city or southern Syria as *terra incognita*. Damascus was not invested by nomadic soldiery new to the environment. The group which largely led the occupation was from the town-dwelling elements: Meccans of the Quraysh tribe which had long had fruitful trading links with Syria and even already owned property there; Ansars from Medina; and Yamanis long used to urban environments.²⁵ From almost the beginning of the Arab conquest (after the death of the Arab commander Abu 'Ubayda in 639), Damascus was governed by Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, a leading figure from the Meccan aristocracy whose extensive family, named after his grandfather Mu'awiya al-Akbar, had longstanding property interests in southern Syria. Mu'awiya ensured that others did not encroach upon the family's Syrian interests, limiting immigration to relatives of those families already domiciled. The Qurayshis had reserved for themselves the key positions in the first armies that probed Syria. They felt at home in the Syrian milieu and may even have been attracted by its cosmopolitan side just as many Saudi and Gulf Arabs today spend their summers in the more benign climate of Cairo or Beirut.

For the first 14 years, under the leadership of the 'Rashidun' or 'Rightly Guided' Caliphs, Damascus was not the prime focus of the new rulers' attention. The loose system of Arab administration under the 'Commander of the Faithful' in Medina did not require a heavy hand in Syria. Damascus was made the capital of Islamic Syria as early as 'Umar's Caliphate (634–644). The broad principles of provincial administration had been set out at the Jabiya conference in 639 at which 'Umar presided. Syria was divided into four military districts (*ajnad*, plural of *jund*): Dimashq, Hims, Palestine and Jordan. It remained a firm base during the Umayyad conquest of Iraq (639–646). A new Muslim army was later raised to take on the subjugation of Egypt (640–646) and many Syrians served as recruits.

The real rise of Damascus, however, began with Mu'awiya's deep resentment at the murder in 656 of the third Caliph, 'Uthman, victim of dissidents opposed to Umayyad dominance of the Caliphate. The Damascus governor received the murdered Caliph's bloodstained shirt from 'Uthman's wife and displayed it for a year in the Damascus Mosque, intentionally stirring up feeling against the murderers. 'Ali, a cousin of the Prophet, had exploited anti-Umayyad feeling to take over power on 'Uthman's murder. 'Ali's marriage to Muhammad's daughter, Fatima, was the basis of later claims to his superior legitimacy on grounds of proximity to a direct descendant of the Prophet. But 'Ali's own moral standing was questioned by Mu'awiya, who saw him as profiting from 'Uthman's murder.

'Ali's Caliphate lasted from 656 to 661 and was rent from the start with disputes and attacks on his legitimacy: the first Islamic civil war. In 657, he was challenged by the army of Mu'awiya's followers at Siffin (now submerged beneath the Euphrates Lake in northern Syria) and had to resort to a humiliating arbitration that fatally undermined his legitimacy. 'Ali was murdered in 661 by a group of dissidents. This was not, however, the end of the 'Alite cause. Bad feeling between the followers of 'Ali and the Meccan aristocracy of the Umayyads ran as an undercurrent throughout the succession of Umayyad Caliphs from Mu'awiya onwards.

The rankle emerged again two decades later with the defeat of 'Ali's son, Hussein, at the Battle of Karbala (Iraq, 680). The martyrdom of Hussein became the issue that propelled the cause of the direct descendants of the Prophet through several centuries, to surface again later with the resurgence of the Shi'ia sect in Syria.

Notes

- 1 Ball 2016: 22.
- 2 Frend 1972: 337.
- 3 One of the commanding figures of early Islam whose tomb is still revered today on the northern outskirts of Homs.
- 4 Khalid's actual route from Iraq is not entirely clear though the entry point is attested – see Crone 'Khalid b. al-Walid' in *EI2*; Donner 1981: 124; Musil 1927: 553–573; Dussaud 1927: 283 on the location.
- 5 Elisséeff 'Dimashk' in *EI2*.
- 6 Williams and Friell 1998: 241.
- 7 Sahas 1972: 17–18; Nasrallah 1950: 23.
- 8 Al-Baladhuri (Hitti trans.) 1966: 187; Donner 1981: 132.
- 9 Jandora 1985: 14 says 40,000, allowing for some depletion of the field army of 70,000 to garrison cities but he does not seem to be counting the Ghassanid allies.
- 10 A vexed issue – this approximates Jandora's acceptance of Saif Ibn 'Umar's 36,000 but is higher than other estimates.
- 11 Djabiya' in *EI2*; Foss 1997: 251–252, 255; Key Fowden 1999: 144.
- 12 Jandora 1985: 19 implies that the two events were simultaneous.
- 13 Ostrogorsky 1969: 111.
- 14 Al-Baladhuri (Hitti trans.) 1966: 210. Friedmann's translation of al-Tabari (al-Baladhuri's source) gives several different versions (al-Tabari XII: 182). The possibility that the quote is a *topos* is examined by Conrad in Reinink and Stolte (eds) 2002: 113–156. The route of Heraclius' departure from Syria is examined in Kaegi 2003: 247–2428.
- 15 Ostrogorsky 1969: 102, 111. Kaegi 2003: 265–299 gives a full account of Heraclius' last years. For the crossing of the Bosphorus, Kaegi 2003: 287–288.
- 16 Quoted in Frend 1972: 353. See also Kaegi 1969: 139.
- 17 The first was Sarjun ibn Mansur, who succeeded his father who had been hired by al-Mu'awiya to bring order to the Caliphate's finances – Nasrallah 1950: 32–34; Sahas 1972: 26.
- 18 Dates follow Sahas 1972: 40–45. Nasrallah 1950: 71–81 assumes an earlier date for his resignation.
- 19 There was another later exception, the 'new city' at Anjar (just over the Lebanese–Syrian border), probably initiated by al-Walid in 714–715 – Gaube 1999: 343–351. The only other exception was the new town of al-Ramla in Palestine established as his capital by Caliph Suleiman (r.715–717) – Hitti 1951: 511. On Jabiya – 'Djabiya' *EI2*.
- 20 Frend 1972: 358.
- 21 Abiad 1981: 164, 222–227.
- 22 Bulliet 1979: 107.
- 23 There are many versions of the 'Pact of 'Umar' (Caliph 634–644) from which this is adapted.
- 24 Nasrallah 1985: 57; Walmsley 1995: 657–668; Shboul and Walmsley 1998: 284–285.
- 25 Shboul 1994: 84.

9

THE UMAYYADS (661–750)

Mu'awiya and the new order

With the fortuitous death of 'Ali, the Umayyads reasserted the claim on the Caliphate they had established under 'Uthman. Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan (r.661–684) was a shrewd, decisive, temperate leader. Without these qualities, it is doubtful that the tensions involved in the first civil war could have been resolved in time to save the new empire from disintegration. Although the Umayyads, the traditional 'establishment' family of Mecca, were accused of converting to Islam through opportunism rather than inspiration,¹ Mu'awiya had been a companion of the Prophet who had built on his family's existing links with Syria during his term as governor of the province (639–661). He was careful not to install an Umayyad family aristocracy but sought legitimacy based on consensual leadership drawing on as wide a base as possible. He eschewed 'Ali's claim to religious primacy and based his political authority essentially on the army. He organised the Syrian forces along regular lines, eliminating the tribal factionalism that had traditionally determined the force structure.

After Mu'awiya's installation as Caliph in Jerusalem, the centre of gravity of the Umayyad Empire moved to Damascus, away from the intrigues of Medina and 'Ali's preferred capital, Kufa. Why Damascus? It was essentially a thorough-going restructuring of the Islamic movement around the Umayyads' interests based on political pragmatism. The long residence of Mu'awiya had consolidated the family's property assets in the city. It offered an environment a good deal softer than the Hijaz but one in which Arabs had no difficulty in feeling at home. The last chapter noted increasingly close links between Damascus and the Arab world to its south. These extended not only to the Ghassanids and the old Nabataean towns of the Hauran; they continued as far as the Hijaz through trade and religious contacts. It was only logical for the Umayyads, who had themselves profited

from those links, to see Damascus as the first major city brought into the Arab sphere. Damascus had quickly become 'the defining pivot'.² While the Umayyads may have increasingly seen Jerusalem as a city of central religious significance (an apocalyptic connection associating Jerusalem 'with the end of time and the divine judgement'),³ Mu'awiya appeared only briefly tempted by the thought of making it his political base.⁴ Damascus was a more logical choice. Rather than uproot himself from the city where he was already governor, Mu'awiya brought the new order to him, remaining safely remote from the intense inter-tribal and religious tensions of the Hijaz and retaining a powerful political base which rivals would find difficult to assail.

The Umayyad prism

That might be the logical explanation for this radical move away from the Hijaz. To this should perhaps be added a more subliminal explanation: the Umayyad leader's wish to open the new regime to a broader range of ideas. Damascus straddled the Byzantine and Arab worlds. The cultured Umayyads sought to appropriate the intellectual underpinnings that had so successfully made Syria a secure base for Rome and later for Byzantium in such a diverse region. If the new empire was to be sustainable, it had to absorb that experience, albeit through the new faith, Islam. The Umayyad experiment was to be the result of that bold attempt at a new synthesis.

Yet it would be rash to minimise the import of the change which had taken place by over-emphasising the continuity the Umayyads drew from the Damascus environment. A whole order, the experience of a whole millennium, had been overturned. Damascus was no longer a bulwark of the Mediterranean, addressing the Semitic world to its east. It was a bulwark of Islam against the world to the west. It was not, however, the religious heart of the Islamic world but the political capital of the new empire, leaving the religious dimensions of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem intact. The central political role of Damascus in an empire which had no tradition of administrative organisation on a large scale, required that much of the expertise had to be borrowed from the Byzantine and Greek worlds. Thus not all the Hellenic tradition was lost but the context had radically changed. The Umayyad choice was 'perhaps the most pregnant fact in (the city's) entire history'.⁵ Even in defeat, Damascus suddenly found itself again within reach of that imperial goal which had eluded it since Aramaean rule had ended 15 centuries before.

We know little, though, of how Damascus fared in these early days of its new imperial role. Most likely, it was an unassuming beginning and Damascus was allowed to administer itself according to the old practices still partly operated by Christians. The new ruler was sorely distracted by the less-compliant parts of his realm, particularly Iraq where the enemies of the new regime were numerous. The frontline against the Byzantine realms in northern Syria remained troubled and Mu'awiya found it difficult to renounce the idea of total victory over Byzantium, a goal that had implanted itself in the exhilarating aftermath of the Battle of Yarmuk.

Consistent with a leaning towards moderation and openness, the changes that Arab administration brought to the fabric of the city were at first minimal, a contrast to the more brutal occupation of Iraq. The fate of the Cathedral of Saint John is considered below, but other churches within the Roman walls were confirmed in Christian hands. The Umayyad leadership had confiscated the Byzantine governor's palace, along with much of the property of the old ruling class. Given the centrality of the palace and the availability in this area of houses abandoned by the Byzantine elite, this zone south of the temple-church became, perhaps as early as the Caliphate of 'Uthman (644–656), the new focus of the Muslim presence.

As noted above (page 131), most of the new Arab inhabitants probably did not settle inside Damascus. They preferred areas just beyond the gates of the old city or in the Ghouta where some Byzantine estates now lay abandoned. This offered a more sumptuous lifestyle to the original Companions of the Prophet invited to Damascus by the new regime.⁶ The irrigated land eventually had to be expanded to accommodate the new settlers. A major modification to the canal system bears the name of Caliph Yazid I (r.680–683). It still supplies the upper reaches of the slopes below Salahiye, running two metres higher than the original Aramaean canal, the Tora, to reach the agricultural land as far as Harasta to the east. Originally, it may also have been intended to supply the palaces the Arab leaders constructed on the lower slopes of Kassyun. It was the first major project since the Romans' construction of the conduit that fed the city and the land to the south-west. The hydraulic network was now virtually complete.

The 'Alite revolt

Mu'awiya's son Yazid (r.680–683) succeeded him; a break with the tradition of consensus rather than dynastic succession. The growing discontent of the followers of 'Ali surfaced in southern Iraq. After a short battle at Karbala (680), 'Ali's son Hussein was slain by the Umayyad governor (page 134). His death quickly was raised by the supporters of 'Ali to the level of martyrdom, embellished by legends of the humiliation of the remains of this cousin of the Prophet. Many are the spots that claim to have sheltered the head of Hussein, carried in triumph from Karbala by the victorious Umayyads. These include a niche in the present-day Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, though the basis of this legend is not clear, particularly as the compound was at this point still shared with the Christian church.⁷

Yazid himself did not survive long. The succession crisis that followed resulted in the second civil war between tribal and regional factions, the issue being resolved in battle in 684 at Marj Rahit, 17 kilometres north-east of Damascus on the route to Homs (between Duma and 'Adra). The new Caliph, Marwan, was already elderly and survived little more than a year. His son, 'Abd al-Malik (r.685–705), succeeded and in spite of serious rebellions in Mecca and Iraq (685–692), managed to provide two decades of stable leadership which brought significant changes to the laissez-faire system of the early Umayyads. The empire passed from the house of Abu Sufyan to that of Marwan, tribal loyalties were

realigned and the administration regularised on a new footing. An official coinage system was introduced, replacing the previous reliance on Byzantine and Iraqi issues. Whereas each province had been allowed to follow its own traditional system of administration, this was now centralised and provinces were obliged to forward their surplus revenue to the Damascus treasury. The adoption of Arabic as the language of administration underlined the centrality of Islam and was less favourable to the position of Greek-speaking Christians who had dominated administration. The '*ahl al-Sham*' or 'forces of the Syrian community' became a regular army, paid from funds raised through a separately administered revenue system, capable of deployment elsewhere in the empire, overriding the motley tribal units that had originally sustained the ruling power. For the first time, a distinctly Arab regime was in place.

Abd al-Malik died in 705 and was succeeded by his son, al-Walid I, who continued the policies of his father, consolidating a centralised administration and embellishing Damascus with the appurtenances of a court. Al-Walid I's reign (705–715) is usually taken as the high-water mark of the Umayyad Empire, certainly the point at which it reached its greatest extent. The Caliph's domains now stretched from newly conquered Spain (taken 711–716) as far as Khurasan and the Sindh Valley and beyond the Oxus to Samarkand: a greater span of the earth's circumference than even Rome had ruled. More significantly for Damascus, however, was the new ruler's intent to establish in the capital a gleaming symbol of the new order, taking the lead from 'Abd al-Malik's great triumphal monument in Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock, which had established the imprint of Islam on the city of three faiths.

Acquisition of the Church of Saint John

Damascus was both capital of a world empire and one of the first great Arab cities, the centre of the Bilad al-Shams (land of Syria), the basis of Umayyad power. While the Christian presence was still numerically dominant, by the end of the seventh century the Muslim population of Damascus had grown considerably. There were more Muslims than could be accommodated in the limited place initially set aside for their Friday prayers. The capital of a world empire deserved a focus for its religious life and the worship of the court. The grand column-encircled and largely empty courtyard just beyond the Caliph's palace was a tempting acquisition. The Caliph, on leaving his palace, would see emblazoned on the southern doorway of the enclosure that Greek quotation adapted from the Septuagint proclaiming Christ's Kingdom (page 113).⁸

Two caliphs had already unsuccessfully negotiated with the Christians for the cession of the church. This sixth caliph, al-Walid, was more purposefully driven by a desire to set his mark on the architecture of the city. Initially committed to a desert faith attached to modesty in its gestures, the Umayyads now felt the need to outclass the Byzantines in displaying the permanency of the new Islamic order. Al-Walid could, of course, have built outside the walls of the city but he undoubtedly

preferred the ready-made symbolic value of the huge temple compound. Already for more than 1,500 years the focus of the city's religious observance, the attraction of such a site, underlining that the Islamic Empire was the true successor to the Romans and Greeks, was just too great to be set aside.

Al-Walid may also have calculated that the Christians would not put up much of a struggle. Probably even before the end of the seventh century, some accommodation had been reached with the Christians over the use of the compound of the former Roman temple. The fact was, the Christians were not using all the *temenos*. Their worship was confined to the church built somewhere on the western side of the courtyard (see page 113). Though controversy over this issue has raged among scholars for most of last century, it seems logical to conclude that the early Arab descriptions, which talk of the compound being shared by the two faiths, make sense.⁹

Immediately after the conquest, the Muslim leaders had established an area inside the former temple *temenos* to accommodate Muslim prayer. Initially perhaps a *musalla* or open prayer area, using the arcade of the *temenos* to provide the *qibla* wall indicating the direction of prayer, the space was later covered with a simple mudbrick structure. Entering the *temenos*, through the triple doorway beneath Theodosius' inscription, the Muslims turned right to this early version of a mosque, while the Christians veered left towards the Church of Saint John. (The rulers would have had easy access from the Green Palace south of the Mosque's *qibla* wall possibly occupying the space of the Byzantine predecessor – page 137.) This shared use of the compound is consistent with the presence in the eastern

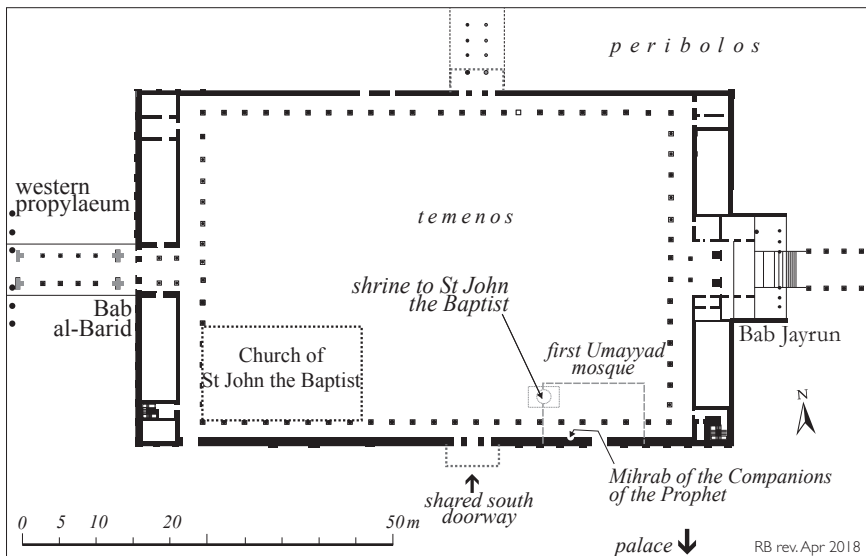


FIGURE 9.1 First Umayyad Mosque

half of the southern wall of a *mihrab* (niche) probably established by Mu‘awiya,¹⁰ the ‘Mihrab of the Companions of the Prophet’, honouring the first generation of followers of the Prophet.

Much, however, is unknown in this crucial period in Damascus. Most of the later Arab commentaries make it plain that Caliph al-Walid was obliged to tread carefully in taking over the entire compound for Muslim worship. He could, of course, as caliph simply confiscate the property but that would have been a serious setback to his policies of conciliation. Moreover, the agreement under which the Muslims had originally entered Damascus on largely peaceful terms, negotiated with the local bishop, guaranteed to the Christians the continued use of their holy places, though the precise terms are not known since only later summaries survive. Al-Walid was apparently able to get around its terms by new negotiations with the Christians. As part of the agreed modifications he granted the Christians access to three additional spots for churches in the old city.

The building of the Mosque

The building of the Mosque, though based on respect for law and the rights of the Christian inhabitants, clearly sought to assert in monumental terms the Islamic ascendancy.¹¹ Al-Walid underlined the point in initiating the project with some enthusiasm in 706, a year after his accession. Brushing aside the qualms of the mainly Christian workforce, he took an axe and aimed the first blows at the tabernacle of the Christian church. Thereafter, the Christians had to be content with the Church of Saint Mary on Straight Street as the site of their major cathedral, a spot still occupied by the patriarchate of the major Christian denomination, the Greek Orthodox (Antioch rite), though the present church, as noted earlier, dates only as far back as the nineteenth century.

The cathedral church had been dedicated to Saint John. John the Baptist was one of the prophets also honoured in the Islamic tradition. Arab writers were to find a way to maintain respect for the tradition of the church’s dedication in their later accounts of the origins of the Mosque. The attribution to Saint John thus passed to Islamic custody, just as, for example, the reliquary with Saint Sergius’ remains at Rusafa were linked to a mosque which continued the saint’s pilgrimage tradition.¹² The Damascene chronicler, ibn ‘Asakir (1105–1176), in his *Description of Damascus* provides what Finbarr Flood has described as the ‘politically expedient’ link ‘to capitalise on the sanctified or mythologised relics of an historic past’.¹³ According to ibn ‘Asakir, Caliph al-Walid was alerted to the relic by workmen who had come across a cavity under the site of the Mosque: ‘The Caliph entered the cavern, his way lit by candles. Inside was a box enclosing a large basket containing the head of the revered John (Yayha), son of Zachariah’.¹⁴

Walid ordered the head reburied and incorporated within the Mosque, the spot marked with a column known as al-Sakassek.¹⁵ It is tempting to wonder if a simple excavation under the Mosque floor might satisfy idle curiosity about the church’s link with Saint John the Baptist. Unfortunately the burial spot took

the full brunt of the disastrous inferno of 1893 which destroyed much of the interior of the Mosque. The present shrine is a late Ottoman work erected on the traditional site of the cave.

For a dynasty which had only been in power for 50 years, which had no tradition of large-scale construction and which was operating in a city which had initiated no major public works for several centuries, the new mosque was a huge undertaking. The basic elements required for Islamic worship in the early decades had been relatively straightforward: a prayer hall or sanctuary, preferably covered; a *qibla* wall indicating the direction of Mecca; a colonnaded courtyard to handle the great majority of the faithful; and ablution facilities.¹⁶ The decision to use the walls of the *temenos* (external dimensions 160 by 100 metres)¹⁷ as the perimeter of the new complex posed some awkward constraints. It meant the mosque simply had to be built on an unparalleled scale, probably greater than was justified by the size of the Muslim community at the time. The other factor determining the size and orientation of the building was the need to orient the faithful to the south, the direction of Mecca. The southern wall also held the memory of the first prayers by the Companions of the Prophet in the direction of Mecca.¹⁸ This made it necessary to establish an axis that ran at 90 degrees to the east–west orientation of the

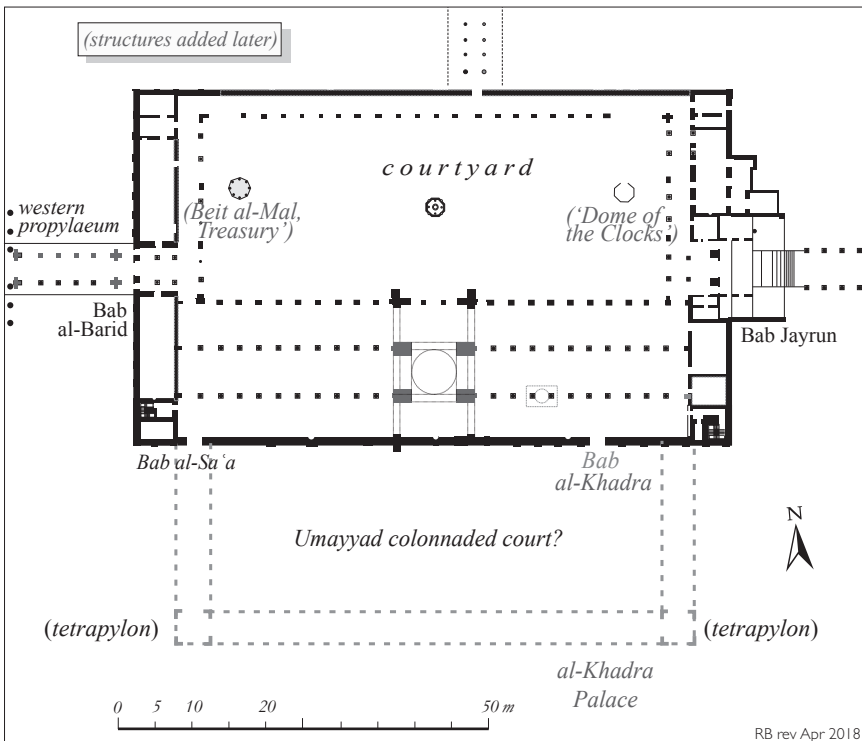


FIGURE 9.2 Walid's Great Mosque

courtyard: a problem exacerbated, of course, when only the southern half of the compound was selected for the project, resulting in a space more than three times as long as it was broad.

Like other early Umayyad projects, the solution reached not only overcame these handicaps but provided a stroke of pure theatre. The Roman idea of a basilica, a space divided by columns or piers into three aisles, was brilliantly adapted to what was by now the accepted form of a congregational mosque. The concept of a three-aisled interior running east–west was observed using probably a mixture of columns and capitals from the classical structure.¹⁹ What was new was the decision to superimpose a north–south axis across the middle. Instead of leaving a long undifferentiated space,²⁰ the east–west span was bisected by a high central transept, a device almost unknown in the Roman or Byzantine repertoire.

To avoid a clash with the transept, the central aisle of the basilica did not follow the Roman-Byzantine convention of being wider or higher than the other two; all were equal in width, avoiding the impression a broad central aisle might have given that either the western or eastern end of the building was its focal point. To cap the arrangement, a dome (originally in wood) was placed over the central part of the transept, another novelty perhaps to provide an additional element of theatre, marking the spot reserved for the caliph's worship. Certainly the great dome, originally flanked by two half-domes, was to attract enthralled descriptions from later Muslim travellers, including ibn Jubayr who climbed inside its double shells in 1184 and admired the glittering decoration of its wooden interior. Sadly, the present dome is two removed from the original and preserves none of the complexity or rich decoration of what ibn Jubayr describes as 'an overwhelming sight, an awe-inspiring spectacle'.²¹ The old southern triple doorway to the *temenos* had become redundant but the westernmost aperture now accommodated a *mihrab*. Whatever remained of this original *mihrab* (praised by ibn Jubayr as 'the most wonderful in Islam for its beauty and rare art')²² was unfortunately lost in the 1893 fire.

The awkward shape of the interior was not the only problem to be resolved. The decision to preserve the high *temenos* meant that most of the Mosque walls lacked windows or doors. The need for light and air was solved by setting the pitched wooden roof, originally covered with tiles, sufficiently high to provide windows above the line of the *temenos*. (The windows' superb fretwork in interlaced marble bands prefigured a style that would be characteristic of Islam.) Access from the courtyard side was by the arcaded openings that provided unfettered passage and copious light and air. (The present wooden doors are a relatively recent addition.)

The courtyard façade provided one touch unmistakably borrowed from the Byzantine repertoire. Vast in scale, it is particularly restrained in its outline with only two piers to provide relief on what is otherwise a rather two-dimensional screen. The effect relies on basic Byzantine themes of simple arches: a triple arched lower course topped by smaller windows that echo the theme, the whole enclosed in a soaring arch that repeats the basic form. More than one commentator has remarked on the façade's striking resemblance to a pre-Justinianic palace depicted in the mosaics of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna.²³ For the rest of the *temenos*, al-Walid

retained the towers that had stood at each corner of the Roman temple and the two southern ones were to serve as forerunners of the minarets later used to summon the faithful to prayer.²⁴ (The subsequent fate of the towers is discussed below.)

There was a wider dimension to the caliph's great plan that illustrated the Umayyads' interest in employing town planning as a means of integrating political and religious symbolism. South of the Mosque, Mu'awiya had consolidated the caliphal palace within the outer *peribolos* of the temple at a place possibly developed in Byzantine times as the governor's palace. The caliphs retitled it Dar al-Khadra ('the Green Palace') and from Arab literary sources we know that Mu'awiya rebuilt it as a complex mansion with service areas attached.²⁵ Nothing survives of the Umayyad structures but in the lane running south from the western end of the south wall of the Mosque, remains of 30 to 40 columns from a portico joining the Mosque to the palace were visible until the mid-nineteenth century (see Figure 9.2). This characteristic Umayyad arrangement of ruler's palace (*dar al-'imara*), colonnaded courtyard and mosque has been found repeated at several Umayyad sites.²⁶

The fantastic garden

Al-Walid's real *coup de théâtre* was the courtyard itself. Perhaps borrowing from the plan of the Prophet's original house-mosque in Medina or precedents in Iraq, the courtyard was an integral part of the plan.²⁷ The Roman colonnade around the open space was greatly modified. The southern half, of course, had to be dismantled to clear the way for the prayer hall. In the northern half, the



FIGURE 9.3 Façade of the transept of the Umayyad Mosque

original columns were partly replaced with more robust piers in a pier–column–column pattern. Some of the Roman columns were kept *in situ*, others reused elsewhere. (In a later Arab reconstruction of the northern colonnade, all of the columns were removed and piers substituted.)

All of this might have made a remarkable building in itself, a fitting message that the Umayyads were now masters of the known world from Persia to the Atlantic, and Damascus was their seat. What had been a striking *temenos* with a beautifully regular colonnade and a soaring central *cella* was now to receive a final embellishment that was to be a cause of wonder across the centuries. Al-Walid ordered that every available space above the marble panelling of the lower walls be filled with mosaics, an unprecedented step on such a scale outdoors.

The caliph assembled a team of local and imported craftsmen clearly schooled in the classical tradition and its local variations. The synthesis, it should be emphasised was the Umayyads' own though it borrowed elements long familiar in the

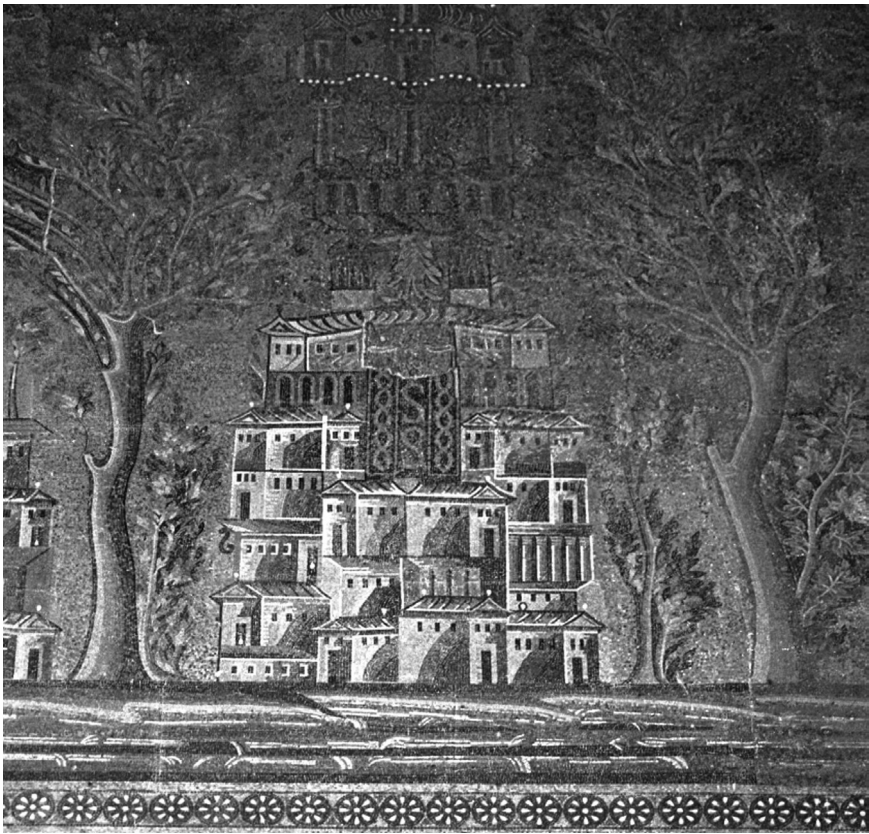


FIGURE 9.4 Barada panel houses – mosaic detail from the western *riwaq* of the Umayyad Mosque

local repertoires.²⁸ Some 40 tonnes of glass and stone cubes (of which 12 tonnes in green alone) were set so that the whole space shone and glimmered like a fantastic garden, each cube carefully angled to catch the light when seen from below. What we see now is a compromised version of the original but it is still enough to give a sense of its overpowering impact.²⁹ Every surface seen from the courtyard above the lower walls was covered by an imaginary vision of what Paradise might be like: 'As for those that fear their Lord, they shall dwell in lofty chambers set about with running streams. Such is Allah's promise'.³⁰

The surfaces abound with life yet there are no signs of human or animal representation in accordance with the norms of the new faith. Instead, on a shimmering gold background was spread a prolific carpet of vegetation and streams interspersed with orchards, palaces, rotundas and houses, piled up in a style that seems to borrow elements from many traditions, from oriental to classical.

The interior of the prayer hall was even more lavishly decorated. Up to a height of at least three metres, the marble panelling was repeated along the interior walls, some panels being richly decorated with detail picked out in gold. The Umayyads clearly borrowed from the Late Roman tradition the love for green and red coloured marble in geometric patterns, interleaved with pilasters and bordered by bands of inlaid marble or mosaic decoration. Only two fragments and a few photos of the pre-1893 panelling survive,³¹ corroborating the reconstruction done by Sauvaget from literary evidence of the patterned panelling of the contemporary Prophet's Mosque at Medina. (A small section of comparable paneling inside the eastern gate, Bab Jayrun, repeats the decorative scheme including the elaborate mosaic acanthus band – Figure 9.5). Flood's study of the Mosque locates the placement of the Koranic dedicatory inscription on the south wall below the marble colonnettes.³² This extraordinarily costly embellishment ran in four bands of gold on a ground of lapis lazuli, remains of which also survived until the 1893 fire. An acanthus- and a grape-decorated sculptured marble band picked out in gold (the *karma*) surmounted the panelling, underlining the Umayyad use of familiar symbols as a means of defining sacred space.³³ Above that again, richly patterned mosaics, as exuberantly treated as the courtyard, completed the wall decoration.

Much ink has flowed on the subject of whether the design scheme for the Mosque was Byzantine, neo-Roman, Sasanian, Syrian or a first flowering of a new 'Islamic' art. It was, of course, all of these things. Like all great syntheses, it rose above its several origins and reflected the vitality of the local Syro-Palestinian artistic repertoire in spite of the dislocations of previous decades. Like much Umayyad art, its restless concern for detail reflected a *horror vacui*. It was, too, a summation of the skills of a multinational task force drawn not just from local sources but from visiting experts who brought their own specialisations and traditions, to create 'a world of the imagination – half fantasy, half real'.³⁴ Above all, the synthesis represented the convergence of two realities: the waning of the antique and an Islamic sensibility still striving to find its language. Guiding it all was the hand of a caliph intent on using the Mosque to spread the message of the new order at its flood.



FIGURE 9.5 Mosaic band and marble panelling surviving from the eighth century Umayyad Mosque, eastern *riwaq*

To the faithful, as well as to the non-Muslim to whom the message was equally directed, the result was a scene both exotic and familiar. The architectural detail was a *mélange* but the trees and vegetation were those of the Ghouta: figs, almonds, pomegranates, apples, pears, as well as cypresses. True, the Byzantine tradition also sought to cover some visible surfaces with geometric or representational art but no one had gone so far before, to cover not just the interior walls but such a huge outdoor space in rich mosaics glittering in a profusion of colours across the thousand square metres of the façade of the marble-flagged courtyard and its colonnades.³⁵ Compare this dreamlike scene (conflated from the familiar, fanned by breezes and cooled by streams) with the more severely stylised decorative repertoire of the first of the great Umayyad architectural creations (erected by Walid's father, 'Abd al-Malik), the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem completed 13 years before work on the Umayyad Mosque began. There the striving for the exotic is heavier and

baroque; here was depicted an accessible Paradise that must have drawn gasps from all who ventured into this fantastic garden. This, particularly to an Arab audience, presented the many descriptions of Damascus as the point on earth that provided a foretaste of the Paradise Islam offered to the faithful. Nothing to rival it had been seen in the world until then; and nothing since.

Threshold of Paradise

No expense was spared in this realisation of al-Walid's dream. It cost seven years of the total income of the Damascus treasury. Though virtually all the stone for the new structure was already available on site (the long walls of the *peribolos* probably began to be dismantled at that time), the Umayyad world was combed for other materials to the extent of robbing sarcophagi to find scarce lead for the roofs. Craftsmen were brought in from Egypt to supplement the basically local team but later Arab accounts that the Byzantine ruler was inveigled into sending a group from Constantinople seem fanciful. What is more remarkable is that this was only one of three major prestige mosques commenced under al-Walid, the others were the new mosque on the site of the Prophet's house at Medina (707–709), the first Islamic place of worship, and the rebuilding of the al-Aqsa Mosque, completing the dedication of the sacred platform in Jerusalem to the greater glory of Islam (?709–714).³⁶ It is impossible not to see these projects and the urgency that drove them, in the words of Robert Hillenbrand's survey, as 'documenting the emergence of the Muslims from Christian cultural tutelage'. Al-Walid may have been inspired by the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (691–692), a monument essentially commemorating the triumph of Islam over the old orders, and which showed the rich possibility of adapting mosaic decoration to deliver Islamic messages. The choice of the three new building sites (Medina, Jerusalem and Damascus) was certainly symbolic, affirming the status of the new faith as the successor to Judaism and Christianity, linking the Hijaz with the new empire and the comparatively Hellenised province of Syria.

The inclusion of Damascus and the use of an architectural idiom reconfigured to accord with Islamic needs was an essential part of that symbolic continuum. As the great port of the desert, Damascus was the natural point of interconnection between the Hellenistic and the Semitic world. Reaffirming Islam's roots in the Hijaz (hence the splendid new mosque at Medina, recovered only a decade before at the end of the second civil war), al-Walid wanted his people to continue to turn towards the outside world and learn from its achievements. They need have no fear of being ranked second best. According to a ninth century Arab writer, al-Muqaddam 'Walid sought to give Muslims a mosque which drew attention to themselves; a mosque to be counted as one of the marvels of the world' alongside the churches the Christians had built in Bilad al-Shams.³⁷ Islam was a greater truth that displaced Judaism and Christianity (hence the Jerusalem monuments which sought to outdo Constantine's Rotunda over the Holy Sepulchre and its associated basilica). Damascus was their future, the centre of a new world stretching across

an empire greater than Alexander's: a worthy replacement for Rome's broken domain; a new Jerusalem, a new Constantinople. The Mosque was the glittering epicentre of this new civilisation, probably the most richly decorated building since the passing of ancient Rome. In the 14 years from the Dome of the Rock to the Umayyad Mosque, the Umayyads developed a series of architectural symbols of great significance and massive proportions, decorated with unparalleled splendour. They were truly imperial gestures marking the transition in a few generations from a people who had few architectural traditions to an empire that dramatically asserted its new order.

There is an additional dimension to the Damascus project that it is difficult to fathom in our present state of knowledge of early Islam. As part of the process of shifting the centre of gravity of Islam to the west, Damascus acquired a form of 'special sacred status'. It was in a 'region that was blessed by God, over which His angels had spread their wings, and in which His Prophets lived and died' and one that would have a particular role on the Day of Judgement.³⁸ This was enshrined in the *hadiths* or early Islamic traditions attributed to the Prophet. It encouraged a steady flow of settlement, particularly among the Yamani tribes from Arabia³⁹ and gave the Umayyad dynasty particular prestige. This new stature, building on the old temple tradition and the association with John the Baptist, now culminated in a project transforming once again this long-sacred compound. The real intent of Walid's extravagant gesture was now clear to every beholder, Muslim or not: Damascus had become a sacred site of Islam.

A ninety-year empire

The project marked the self-confidence of the empire's zenith. Al-Walid had developed an imperial architectural style to match the empire's ambitions now stretching to North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. Then, in 715, as the finishing touches were being applied to the Mosque, al-Walid died. Two more sons of 'Abd al-Malik, Suleiman (r.715–717) and 'Umar II (r.717–720), succeeded for brief periods before a fourth brother, Hisham (r.724–743), took power for a markedly successful Indian summer of Marwanid rule. Hisham achieved great fame too as a builder, but not in the cities. The 'palaces' still loosely attributed to him are scattered throughout the desert margins of Syria and Palestine.

Later caliphs were not to have the same call on resources or the mastery of the different ethnic and cultural strands that the second generation of caliphs had achieved. It was partly the problem of all empires when a process of rapid expansion suddenly reaches stasis. Internal tensions, including rivalries between various tribal groups, began to undermine the unity that had been forged within the Umayyad military. The elite that had formed the core of the army (*ahl al-Shams*) began to lose coherence. 'Umar II had briefly tried to emphasise that the universal mission of Islam meant embracing all who would accept the faith rather than seeing it as an Arab movement. In the end, the base was too small. 'In historical terms, Umayyad rule from Syria was something of an aberration; in the ultimate

analysis, the country was not populous enough, united enough or wealthy enough to sustain a vast empire'.⁴⁰

The chances of Damascus retaining its role as a world capital were further weakened by the later Caliphs' lack of interest in it as a place of residence. The capital became a moveable phenomenon. Suleiman had taken up residence in al-Ramla (Palestine), Hisham in Rusafa, the Christian pilgrimage centre which still attracted immense crowds of Arabs of all persuasions from the central desert. The practice of building desert palaces, permanent versions of the pre-Islamic frontier encampment (*hira*), was a romantic evocation of the dynasty's desert roots and revealed the continued eclectic tastes of the leadership. This experimentation, however, had striking artistic results. The doorway, for example, of the Umayyad palace at Qasr al-Heir al-Gharbi, reconstructed in the 1950s as the entrance to the National Museum in Damascus, is another brilliant piece of stagecraft. It presents to the daunted visitor a huge screen of restless decoration, a more fantastic version of the *scaenae frons* that formed the backdrop to Roman theatre stages. This type of walled enclosure (*qasr al-heir*) probably served a mixture of practical purposes (agriculture, stock control, hunt, search for desert roots, refuge from regular bouts of plague, contact with desert tribes)⁴¹ were found in many parts of the Syrian and Jordanian deserts, often within reasonable distance of Damascus (like the *qasr* from which the gateway has been taken), sometimes in wildly romantic settings such as the dead volcano core at Jebel Seis (100 kilometres east of the capital, also a work of al-Walid). The most fantastic, and best preserved in its outer walls, is perhaps the Eastern Qasr al-Heir, 100 kilometres east of Palmyra where its twin fortress walls still keep watch. The gardens, the irrigation works, the game park and baths have all gone, leaving the blank walls staring out at the victorious desert.

It has verged on a truism, carefully sown by their successors, that the Umayyads petered out in a farrago of excess and frivolity. Recent studies more prosaically blame the draining effects of continuous warfare against the Byzantines in an attempt to regain the momentum of 'holy war'. Perhaps it all just became too difficult and the rulers retreated, each to their own favoured corner of the Syrian wilderness, having failed to reconcile all the opposites in the Syrian mix. There, some of the late caliphs gave themselves to lives of libertinism, though we need to be cautious about taking a figure as extreme as al-Walid II (r.743–744) as representative of the age. 'Walid II only played with power' was the judgement of the German historian, Wellhausen. 'He was distinguished by a foolish, frothy sense of power'.⁴² His love for poetry and music were endearing qualities but if the remains of his extraordinary palace at Khirbet al-Mafjar, near Jericho in Palestine, are anything to go by, his taste took Umayyad eclecticism to new limits. Some features such as the magnificent mosaic floor of the 'music room' are virtuoso syntheses; others such as the highly ornate arches – piling Mesopotamian, Roman, Byzantine and proto-Arab flourishes in restless profusion – are high-Victorian in their surfeit of enthusiasm, especially when the effect is embellished with baroque cupids and animal figures. Walid II could be perfectly engaging and erudite but his indulgence in prolonged celebrations of the virtues of wine showed a cultural insensitivity that

not surprisingly provoked his enemies into arranging his demise. A few Yamanis were hired to do the deed. He anticipated his doom and fled Jericho heading east, via Damascus, to seek solace in the sterility of the desert at the remote palace at al-Bkhara, fragments of which survive 20 kilometres south of Palmyra.

Leave me Sulaymah, wine, a girl to sing, a cup:
That's wealth enough for me!
Though life be on a bare sand hill, with Salma in my arms
I would not have it changed.⁴³

Here the Yamanis caught up with him. He was hacked to death as he read the Koran; his head was carried to Damascus as a trophy for the man who had taken out the contract, the new Caliph Yazid III. Yazid had risen to power on a campaign of austerity (inaugurated by riding into Damascus on a donkey), promising to indulge in no more extravagant public works. This renunciation of the great days of the Umayyads did little good: his reign lasted only 162 days as the empire dissolved into tribal disputes and serial revolts across the provinces.

The last of the Umayyad Caliphs, Marwan II (r.744–750), seemed to have the qualities of dogged ruthlessness required to restore the dynasty's authority. He was proclaimed Caliph in the Great Mosque in Damascus but quickly fell afoul of the factional system that had long been fatally undermining any authority surrounding the Caliph. Unable to take on his Yamani opponents, now dominant in southern Syria, he moved his capital to Harran in the Jazira; a move perhaps also inspired by persistent outbreaks of plague in Damascus. Having previously served in Armenia and Azerbaijan, he sought to abandon the traditional Syrian army that had sustained the regime. He built up an alternative force among the Qays regiments deployed in the north-east of Syria after the original conquest but the effort involved in putting down the revolt far away in southern Syria depleted the Caliph's capacity to hold the provinces further east where the marginalised Arabs of Khurasan rose in open revolt.

From his new base in Harran, Marwan suppressed his enemies with brute force as he struggled to regain Iraq. Damascus was finally abandoned by the dynasty that had catapulted it to world empire. Its walls were dismantled and its elite massacred by its own ruler. In 750, his enemies from the 'Abbasid faction in Iraq, who had since 718 challenged Umayyad authority and sought to claim the Caliphate for the descendants of the Prophet's uncle, al-'Abbas, defeated Marwan in battle at the River Zab, a tributary of the Tigris. The first struggle between Islamic empires was essentially not a battle between Syria and Iraq but a contest between two marginalised people, the Qays of the north-east or Jazira and the Khurasanis. Marwan fell back to Damascus where not surprisingly he found no refuge. The city he had shunned finally shut its gates on him. It was fed up with the squabbling Umayyads; the days of glory of the early Caliphs had long gone. So on to Egypt. At Busir (Busiris, probably in the Fayyum oasis) he was finally cut down, fighting.

A glorious failure?

After a brief resistance, Damascus fell to the 'Abbasids on 25 April 750. The 90-year Umayyad experiment had ended. Mu'awiya had founded an empire that depended for its authority on the Quraysh as the inevitable inheritors of the Prophet's command. The Umayyad era sought to erect a Caliphate based on secular authority, without a direct line of descent from the Prophet, but it failed to develop the political institutions needed to complement military power in holding the empire together. It sought to leave Islam's religious centre back in Medina and Mecca and select what was best from both the old and new orders. It fell, in the end, a victim of Arab factionalism. Its disputes still drew on the desert tribal heritage. The Umayyads stood aside from the religious tradition which grew up under their rule and which determines the tenets of Islam to this day.⁴⁴ 'The Umayyads regarded themselves as God's representatives at the head of the community and saw no need to share or delegate their authority to the emergent class of religious scholars'.⁴⁵ By preferring to keep Islam as the religion of the privileged elite, it ignored the universalist nature of the Prophet's message, thereby storing up pressures which erupted way to the east in Khurasan, demanding that Islam become a missionary expansionist creed.

The Umayyad Caliphs failed too because they had not moulded Damascus to their purpose as a great urban centre able to sustain imperial ambitions. Islam remained an elite religion and failed to put down roots in the city that remained a provincial centre intellectually. One lesson the Umayyads did not learn from the Romans was to rise above their own ethnic identity and fully involve non-Arab Muslims in the fabric of the empire. The centre of gravity of the empire under the late Umayyads had gravitated towards the east. The 'Abbasids rose to power as an amalgam of the eastern (non-Arab) elements who had felt marginalised under the Umayyads. The Umayyads may have won the world's widest empire but they failed to create more than a symbolic capital for it.

In a way, the Islamic victory over Damascus had been too easy. There was no event that marked an abrupt transition from the old to the new order. (Nor, admittedly, was there any inferiority complex that caused the invaders to borrow indiscriminately from the old Graeco-Roman norms, as, say, the Goths did in Italy or Gaul.) Initially willing to accept the local administrative practices, Arabic became the language of official use without apparent demur; it was just another Semitic language to add to the list the Damascenes had long learned to deal in. Most Christians felt no obligation to convert and the sense of an Arab identity through Islam and the Arabic language was not to take hold until the eighth century. Under Walid I, there were still only 45,000 Muslims registered for military service in the *jund* of Damascus (the *jund* included the Phoenician coast), giving a likely total of only 200,000 Muslims out of a total population of perhaps 3,500,000 in Syria/Palestine.⁴⁶

While emphasising the fragility of the Umayyad achievement we should not deny its enduring legacy. Though the Umayyads never embedded their empire the way the Romans or Parthians/Sasanians had, the transfer of the Caliphate to

Damascus, the establishment of a court and a rudimentary education and administrative system did launch the new faith in a form that it could never have achieved if it had remained based in the Hijaz.⁴⁷ By choosing a base that separated the secular from the holy, the Umayyads provided a launching point that enabled the new cause to rise for a while above the fatal factionalism that would have quickly undermined it had it remained in the desert. That impulse lasted only 90 years, but it was a period vital in spreading the new faith to a world audience.

The Great Mosque of Damascus represented the highpoint of the Umayyad dream, coming at a time when its ambitions to conquer even the seat of Byzantium were at a peak. It became too the symbol of the new Islamic architectural order and the paradigm against which major projects for centuries were to be judged. It became the emblem of the brief Umayyad apogee: 'never before and never after did the Syrian capital reach such a peak of power and glory'.⁴⁸

Notes

- 1 The Umayyads were the leading Meccan family, initially opposed to Muhammad's rise though part of the same Quraysh tribal grouping.
- 2 Sourdel 1983: 36.
- 3 Grabar 1996: 133.
- 4 Cameron 1995b: 211 n.47. Peters 1985: 201 speculates that Mu'awiya's plans for making Jerusalem his capital may account for the enormous 'palaces' complex constructed by the Umayyads on the south and south-west limits of the Haram al-Sharif. The thought is explored in Bacharach 1996: 38 and n.102.
- 5 Hitti 1951: 65.
- 6 Many were buried in the Saghir Cemetery but their graves were obliterated over the centuries. Only the tombstone of Abul Darda survives (in the National Museum) and the grave of Bilal al-Habashi. Rihawi 1977: 167.
- 7 In 1184, the Sunni traveller, ibn Jubayr, in his account of Damascus dismissed the association as 'one of the (Shi'ites') more remarkable fabrications'. Equally persistent was the story of Hussein's sister, Zainab, who after witnessing her brother's martyrdom at Karbala was sent to Medina but spent her last year before her death in 685 in her husband's ancestral village of Qaryat Rawiye, a little south of Damascus. Her tomb, visited by prominent Arab travellers of the Middle Ages has now become a major Shi'ite pilgrimage centre following the construction of the Mosque of Sayyida Zainab in the 1950s. See Zuhdy in Gaube and Fansa 2000: 277 and the comprehensive study in Mulder 2014.
- 8 Creswell 1969 I/1: 164; Porter 1855 I: 65.
- 9 Creswell was the first to argue this theory convincingly in Creswell 1969 I/1: 191–196.
- 10 Creswell 1969 I/1: 169–170; ibn Jubayr (Broadhurst trans.) 1952: 275; Bannassi 1989: 55.
- 11 The thinking probably echoed the steps taken by al-Walid in Jerusalem to claim the whole of the former temple platform as an area sacred to Islam. The building of the Dome of the Rock, and the later alignment of the axis of Walid's version of the al-Aqsa Mosque to the Dome, represented the final claiming of the platform for Islam.
- 12 Key Fowden 1999: 178. Jalabert 2001: 17 notes that the first account of the veneration of the head dates to c.903.
- 13 Flood 2000: 198.
- 14 Adapted from Elisséeff 1959: 14–15.
- 15 The name derives from the tribe of al-Sakassek, whose members used to gather between prayers at this spot.
- 16 An interesting recent discussion of the origin of a standard mosque layout is contained in Johns 1999.

- 17 The dimensions are approximate as the *temenos* is not quite a true rectangle. This is partly the result of the original classical construction, exacerbated by later Arab rebuilding.
- 18 Al-Khatib 1999: 25.
- 19 All but two of the capitals were of the Corinthian order and not of uniform size – Wilson 1897: 299 noted their assorted size and origins and the battered state of many of the bases. None of the original capitals or columns survives. Those that did not collapse due to the intense 1893 inferno (the south-western arcade) were removed due to their weakened state and broken up to provide foundations for roads. Creswell 1969 I/1: 165 and n.3.
- 20 Al-Khatib rightly points out (1999: 61) that the effect of the long aisles was that they disappeared into the gloom rather than leaving any defined sense of space.
- 21 Ibn Jubayr (Broadhurst trans.) 1952: 275. See Creswell 1969 I/1: 168–169 on the deficiencies of the present dome which replaced an earlier version torn down after the 1893 fire.
- 22 Ibn Jubayr (Broadhurst trans.) 1952: 279.
- 23 Flood 2000: 163 and fig. 78 argues that the façade or at least the triple-arched central structure, consciously imitated the Chalke, the long-disappeared grand entrance to the palace of the Byzantine emperors at Constantinople.
- 24 Bloom 1989: 31; Robert Hillenbrand 'Manara' in *EI2*.
- 25 A description of the palace by a Byzantine ambassador makes much of the poor quality of construction (baked bricks and timber) – 'the upper part will do for birds, the lower part for rats' – interpreted by Bacharach as a sign that Damascus was not intended to be the permanent political centre for the empire. Flood 2000: 147, however, notes that the story that surfaced in later Arab sources may be no more than a self-perpetuating myth. Later evidence on Umayyad and 'Abbasid governors' residences is explored in Guérin 2000: 230–231.
- 26 For the best recent survey, Bacharach 1991 who concludes (119): 'The mosque and *dar al-'Imara* had to be near each one another to meet local administrative needs, increase the sense of security and solidarity for the ruler and his fellow Muslims, and to establish a palpable sign of Muslim presence'. Nearby analogous arrangements are found in Jerusalem and Anjar. Blankinship 1994: 17 argues that this clustering of facilities recreates the idea of a Roman *principia* for the assembly and review of troops. The arrangement is particularly clear, following recent reconstruction, at 'Amman (probably later by at least 20 years) – Northedge 1992: 88–66.
- 27 Johns 1999 gives a number of possible sources for early mosque plans.
- 28 This bold improvisation was reflected in the structure. Note, for example, the use of experimental arch shapes, pointed and horseshoe, long before they became widespread – e.g. at the western entrance arcade, in the arcading of the prayer hall (replaced post-1893) and the north arch of the transept. Creswell 1969 I/1: 166, 171, 173.
- 29 Several recent commentaries have deplored the insensitive use of modern mosaic cubes in startling hues as well as the use of pattern-book copying of designs in the work done since the 1960s to 'restore' large areas of the mosaic walls. (In addition to the work of Marguerite Gautier van Berchem in Creswell 1979: 324–366, highly critical of the restorations undertaken using modern materials and concepts since 1964, see articles by Bonfioli 1959; Brisch 1988; de Lorey 1931; Stern 1972.)
- 30 Koran Surah 39.20; also Finster 1970–71: 120.
- 31 Two panels from the decoration of the transept pillars survive in the National Museum – catalogue nos A.5 and A.7 ('al-Ush, Abu-l-Faraj 1976: 254).
- 32 Flood 2000: 57–68.
- 33 Flood 2000: Chapter 3 for an interesting discussion of the *karma* band.
- 34 Stern 1972: 224.
- 35 The Arab traveller Muqaddasi reported that the courtyard was paved in white marble at the time of his visit in 985 – Muqaddasi (Miquel trans.) 1963: 168–169. The likelihood that this was the original surface appears to be confirmed by the Syrian authorities' trial excavations in the courtyard in the early 1960s – Rihawi 1963. Rihawi believed that the

floors of the *riwaqs*, however, were covered in white mosaic with little or no over-pattern. It will be noted later that the courtyard was later resurfaced with stone from the eastern gate of the temple.

- 36 Other projects known to have been initiated by al-Walid, using elements of the same architectural idiom, include the Great Mosque at Sana'a and the Mosque of 'Amr at Fustat (Egypt, 710–712). We should also not forget his last major project, the artificial city at 'Anjar, left unfinished by his successors.
- 37 Muqaddasi (Miquel trans.) 1963: 174.
- 38 Cobb 2001: 55; see also Blay-Abramski 1982: 18.
- 39 Shboul 1994: 88.
- 40 Kennedy 1981: 24.
- 41 Bacharach 1996; Dols 1977: 26.
- 42 Wellhausen 2000: 356.
- 43 Hamilton 1985: 157, quoting Isfahani. On Bkhara, see Bauzou 1993: 46–48.
- 44 Hawting 1986: 2.
- 45 Hawting 1986: 13.
- 46 Hitti 1951: 484 quoting Lammens 1921 I: 119–120.
- 47 Kennedy 1986a: 120.
- 48 Hitti 1951: 70.

PART II

Preface

When did the ancient end?

A gap imposes itself in our story here. Much scholarship since Gibbon has been devoted to the reasons for the decline of the ancient world, the evaporation of the spirit of inquiry that had marked the first classical civilisations and the imposition of a supposedly 'dark age' dominated by dogmatic beliefs, imposed authority and oriental formalism. In fact the 'decline' had been a long and slow one and the 'golden age' had probably never been as golden as it suits us to believe.

We have seen that the creeping reassertion of the 'oriental' over the 'western' was a process that waxed and waned throughout the classical millennium in Syria. In the last centuries, a Semitic, particularly Arab, identity was beginning to reassert itself. It is doubtful, however, that there was ever a conscious process of national self-assertion along the lines of that experienced in the last half century's repudiation of colonialism. However, the tide of Hellenism had certainly already begun to ebb before Heraclius made his retreat.

For Damascus, though, the end of the Umayyad experiment does clearly and irreversibly close a long era though the break, as Sartre observes, could never be a simple or clean one: 'History is never made by abrupt breaks; real changes happen only in the long term'.¹ The long continuity in Syria's experiences of the world, however, is now disrupted more effectively than it had been during the momentous events of the crumbling of the Late Roman Empire. While life apparently continued uneventfully in many areas of Syria, possibly until the ninth or tenth centuries, the glimpses we have are very fleeting and what remained of that old life seemed to carry on in pockets sheltered from the new order. It was to be several centuries before the building record resumes and, when it does, it illuminates a totally new picture.

A curtain comes down on Syria, which it is impossible to penetrate from the distance of a thousand years. The brief Arab dominance under the Umayyads was to be succeeded by an assortment of minority groups that began to manipulate the

weakened Caliphate. We know so little of Syria's fate under the 'Abbasids that a gap in our story imposes itself more clearly than at any time over the previous two millennia. In resuming the thread of our account, the narrative passes rapidly over the next three centuries until it reaches the eve of another of those points in Syria's history at which Damascus is again at the heart of a clash between east and west, the Crusades.

Another reason for a pause is that the second half of this book is a different account from the first. After 1100, we begin to have access to written sources, substantial buildings that survive to this day, as well as a continuity of memory that connects us to the present. We rely less on deduction from other centres to make up for the lack of Damascene sources. At times we now find the narrative cluttered by a plethora of accounts and competing claims for control in a very fluid environment. But the main trends are clearer, the events reasonably well established in the record and it is easier to illustrate the story through the buildings that still stand witness to their times.

Note

- 1 Sartre 2001: 991.

10

DECLINE, CONFUSION AND IRRELEVANCE (750–1098)

Ostracism (750–877)

‘Abbasid rule sought a conscious and abrupt break with the past: a revolution in modern terms, not just a change of dynasty. However, it was a revolution that claimed roots stretching back to the beginnings of Islam. Whereas the Umayyads had ignored the need to amalgamate the disparate elements of their empire, the ‘Abbasids immediately had to find a unifying ideology, given the movement essentially relied on the disparate forces of distant Khurasan. The ostensible cause of the ‘Abbasids was to reunify Islam around a caliph chosen from the family of the Prophet Muhammad, spurning the Umayyads (outsiders who had resisted the Prophet’s message until it became opportune to join). The matter was clinched when a surviving descendant of the family of ‘Abdullah ibn al-‘Abbas (d.687) was produced in Kufa and proclaimed as figurehead of the new forces. The fact that the family could not claim direct descent from the Prophet (al-‘Abbas was an uncle of the Prophet) and had previously supported the ‘Alite cause was quickly buried.

Apocalyptic claims abounded, promising to ‘fill the earth with justice and abolish tyranny’:

Oh people, the darkness of the world has now been dissolved and its cover has been removed. The earth and its sky have become radiant. The sun has risen and the moon has shone.

Sermon to mark the ‘Abbasids’ military victory, 750¹

The reality was a lot different from the revolutionary rhetoric. The cause of the supporters of ‘Ali (later known as Shi‘a) was quickly jettisoned. It turned out to be the family of al-‘Abbas that mattered, not descent from the Prophet.² The ‘Abbasids ‘could not be redeemers to both Sunnis and Shi‘a alike’.³ The supporters

of 'Ali were driven underground, not to reach prominence again for two centuries or more.

The 'Abbasids' new strategies had the effect of turning the Muslim world away from its Arab origins and towards Persia. Persians flooded into the new service and Arabs 'lost the exclusive rights to the fruits of power'.⁴ With this went a desire to make a fresh start through a more absolutist form of Islam. The bureaucracy was expanded, and fiscal and internal security tightened. Damascus and Syria as a whole were not as ostracised from the new order as some historians were later to depict but it was certainly made to feel its subordination and its inferior economic status. A vast propaganda campaign swept the new regime into power, rallying the empire around the black banners that had symbolised the cause. Anything that might remind the faithful of the lax rule of the Umayyads had to be destroyed or demonised. Damascus, the emblem of their supremacy, had to be driven into submission. The city that had passed from one faith to another without bloodshed or pillage now felt the vengeance of fellow Muslims. The city that had reached out to its Arab neighbourhood long before the conquering armies arrived at its doors was now rejected by those that shared the new faith.

In looking to the great eastern empires of the past for their inspiration, the 'Abbasids devised the first true empire of Islam, run on centralised lines with a civil service and army appointed and tightly controlled by the centre. The new empire turned towards the eastern model of the Sasanians for inspiration on how to rule its vast domains. The court protocol was Persian, looking back over a century to the empire of Chosroes II. A highly structured administration borrowed from Sasanian models with a series of *diwans* (ministries) assembled under the control of a *wazir* or prime minister. The Arab heritage of Islam was reworked to include the non-Arab peoples that Islam had embraced to the east. The first capital, Khusra, was soon abandoned for Baghdad, a site at the apex of Babylon's days of glory. Here they built anew on a scale that harked back more to Persepolis and Parsargadae than to the sober grid plans of the Graeco-Roman cities. The Umayyads' improvised capital, Damascus, was eclipsed by a grand symmetrical design on Persian lines.

The implantation of this imperial structure was accompanied by an economic and cultural burgeoning which saw the empire's links as far as Europe and China flourish. Europe under Charlemagne, emerging from its centuries of adumbration, sent an embassy to the court of the new superpower, Baghdad – the city of 'A Thousand and One Nights' – under the legendary Caliph Harun al-Rashid (r.786–809). It is ironic that while the Byzantine authorities were busily discouraging any residual connections to classical thought, the 'Abbasids were actively encouraging the mining of the corpus of ancient Greek scientific and philosophical treatises, supplementing the already flourishing schools of scholarship concentrated in Baghdad. A synthesis, but one subordinate to the 'Abbasids' interests, was under way on a scale much bolder than anything Damascus had contemplated.

Teaching Damascus a lesson

Initially Damascus accepted its new rulers without sustained resistance but within six months the province was rocked by a succession of revolts, all too isolated and unfocused to represent a serious threat to the new dynasty. The consequences of 'Abbasid rule were particularly terrible for Damascus. The Great Mosque represented the triumph of Islam so it was spared but everything that recalled the Umayyads was anathema. The Umayyad family was hunted down, the most prominent systematically massacred in Palestine in 750. Many of the surviving office-holders were ostracised by the new regime and few of its military commanders remained in the new army.

Having effaced the leaders of the old regime, the memories of the dynasty were the next target. 'Never before had it been the declared policy of an Islamic ruler to exterminate an extended Muslim family, much less one of Meccan origins'.⁵ Most of the caliphs had been buried in the Bab al-Saghir cemetery that still lies immediately south of the walled city. The 'Abbasid army made it one of their first targets to open the tombs of the caliphs and desecrate and scatter the remains of Hisham, 'Abd al-Malik and Mu'awiya. All reference to their places of burial were removed so that no cult of their memory might remain.⁶ The great palace, immediately south of the Mosque, was probably spared since it was initially used by the 'Abbasid governors; whether in the same form is not clear. The remains of the city walls were torn down. Damascus found itself downgraded to a provincial town of minor importance, so much so that for several centuries we only catch brief glimpses of the city in surviving records.

The retaliation was probably all the more vehement for two reasons. The 'Abbasids had great difficulty in establishing their authority and suspicion of their motives was intense. As a result, fear of a return of the Umayyads became an obsession, all the more vivid once it was realised that one of the Umayyad princes, ten-year-old 'Abd al-Rahman (grandson of the Caliph Hisham (r.724–743)), had escaped his 'Abbasid pursuers by swimming the Euphrates. After a five-year odyssey, he made his way via North Africa to Spain; a land which had been conquered in 711–717 by his ancestors. The Umayyads were to hold on to Spain for centuries, perpetuating the traditions of their Syrian origins in many topographical and architectural traditions. It cannot be excluded that the Umayyads from faraway Spain actively propagated the belief that the descendants of Mu'awiya would return one day to restore the Caliphate to the Umayyad house. Certainly there was a very strong attempt in 811 by 'Sufyani' (followers of the house of Mu'awiya ibn Sufyan) to profit from the 'Abbasids' declining control once the golden period of Harun al-Rashid had passed.

Outside of Damascus, the destructive hand of the 'Abbasids was more selective. The Syrian *ajnad* (the old Umayyad divisions were largely retained) were probably more marked by neglect and the increasing burden of over-taxation than active destruction. Some areas such as the mid-Euphrates around Raqqa and the desert settlement at Salamiya were newly developed to link more closely the

Mesopotamian and the Syrian regions. We know from archaeological evidence that the desert palaces were largely left undisturbed and the Christian churches of Palestine appear not to have suffered any harm from the 'Abbasids. The fact that Syria now became the base for continued campaigns against the Byzantines also meant that its interests could not be entirely neglected.⁷

Damascus and Syria do not just disappear from the written record; they largely vanish too from the physical record under the 'Abbasids. Consistent with the 'Abbasid determination to teach Damascus a lesson, little seems to have been built in the city over the following three centuries. There is one curious exception: the beautiful little treasury (Beit al-Mal) that still stands at the western end of the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque, its hexagonal chamber decorated with mosaic acanthus trails and standing on ancient columns from the Temple of Jupiter. This example may have been based on an Umayyad concept rebuilt in the 'Abbasid period.⁸ Reflecting the special status accorded still to the Mosque complex, al-Fadl ibn Salih ibn 'Ali, the 'Abbasid governor of the city in 788, erected this pavilion for the storage of the Mosque's treasury, raising the small octagonal chamber on eight Roman monolith columns, deeply planted in the ground but with their superb capitals still intact. The chamber was supported on sections of a classical entablature, perhaps all spoil from the columned porticos that once bordered the temple's *temenos*. The mosaic panels echo the rest of the courtyard's decoration though they were heavily restored in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries and were almost entirely reconstructed from fragments in the twentieth century.⁹ A second domed



FIGURE 10.1 Beit al-Mal

pavilion was possibly erected on the corresponding position on the eastern side of the courtyard.¹⁰

There may be one more reminder of the 'Abbasid period in the Great Mosque. The dating of the northern tower, popularly called the 'Minaret of the Bride', is uncertain. We do not know whether a single tower on the northern side was part of al-Walid's original concept. The first tower on this side (substituting for the two corner towers of the Roman temple) may go back to the Umayyads but more likely to the 'Abbasid-Fatimid period as its minaret was described as 'recently built' when the Arab traveller al-Muqaddasi visited Damascus in 985.¹¹ We know, however, that the structure was replaced after a great fire on the northern side of the Mosque in 1174. How much it might have followed the earlier example is unclear.

Sullen revolt

Damascus long retained its reputation among Arab historians as a hotbed of agitation against its 'Abbasid masters. Much of this spirit of rebellion was simply the result of fragile local control within the 'Abbasid realm and a recent study has played down the extent to which the revolts were inspired by nostalgia for Umayyad rule.¹² The challenge by 'Abdullah, the first 'Abbasid governor of Damascus in 754, for example, was clearly based on his personal claim to the Caliphate, rather than a challenge to the 'Abbasids' supremacy. Nevertheless, resentment in Damascus was strong particularly given the harsh treatment of the city under the 'Abbasids. The 'Abbasids are largely seen as having favoured the Yamanis over the Qays. The 'Abbasid takeover in Syria saw a culmination of the tensions which had built up in the third Umayyad civil war and in 744 starkly pitted Qays against Yamanis. Having initially probably been able to rely on Yamani support (the Yamanis are alleged, according to Arab historical sources, to have opened the gates of Damascus to the 'Abbasid general, 'Abdullah ibn 'Ali), the 'Abbasids found that trying to play off tribal favourites often only raised tensions to an unmanageable level. The 'Abbasids took over some elements of the defeated Umayyad forces but largely raised a new army from their followers on the eastern frontiers in Khurasan. The policy of appointing to Damascus commanders who had served the regime in Khurasan intensified the sense of alienation, underlining that Syria was a conquered province.

It thus needed little to bring the unfurling of the white banners of opposition to the 'Abbasids; in the 770s, for example, prolonged fighting around Damascus erupted after a watermelon was stolen from the garden of a Yamani. The mood of sullen revolt continued for many decades, often taking on a tribal dimension, though it did not prevent successive caliphs passing through Damascus with all the panoply of the court. The 'Abbasids abandoned the Umayyad caliphal palace, al-Khadra, converting it to a prison.¹³ They established a new governor's residence outside the south-western walls of the town facing the Jabiya Gate where the governor could be closely protected by his tribal allies who were deployed in the Ghouta and in the Hauran to the south. They took over a site, marked by

gardens and tombs, used as a residence by Abu Muhammed al-Hajjaj, a renowned Umayyad governor of the Hijaz, Iraq and Khurasan (d.714) and protégé of the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (r.685–705). The district still bears the name Qasr al-Hajjaj.¹⁴ Later (in 831), a splendid caliphal residence was built by al-Ma'amun at Deir Murrān on the lower slopes of Mount Kassyun directly north of the city,¹⁵ part of a complex fed by a new canal from the Mnin River. The seventh 'Abbasid caliph, al-Mutawakkil (r.847–861), moved his capital to Damascus, initially planning an extended stay as part of a concerted new campaign against the Byzantines. The experiment, however, lasted only 38 days. The caliph called off his campaign and made a hasty return to Iraq, put off by the city's early summer winds and humid environment, not to mention its high prices and its fleas.

In the early 'Abbasid period, the Christian community (now divided between Orthodox adherents of Constantinople, Monophysites and a restored presence of Nestorians) was largely left to its own devices, as under the Umayyads. After 800, we have more evidence of a perceptible dwindling of Christian communities in the region, notably churches going out of use. A recent study by Schick¹⁶ has noted that the number of churches in Palestine in 813 was only half those in use in 602. The conversion process began to gather pace in the ninth century as the greater part of the Arab population went over to Islam. The non-Arab base population held out for another century or so until the new Shi'a-dominated regimes sought actively to proselytise and favour Muslims. Pressure to convert to Islam, so far largely inspired by tax advantages, became more critical. It was at this time that many remote Christian communities opted for Shi'ite heterodox movements. From the tenth century Muslims began to form the majority of the population but ironically the increasing adoption by the Christian church of an Arab identity ensured its survival.¹⁷

Turkish inroads, Tulunids (877–905)

Ultimately the 'Abbasid period of splendour lasted no longer than the Umayyads'. The Caliphate could no longer claim to represent all Muslims following the loss of Spain and North Africa. By the early ninth century, in the 'glorious' reign of Harun al-Rashid, the seeds of decay were already obvious. Al-Mutawakkil (r.847–861) had tried to give a new focus to the empire by reverting to the old (implicitly Umayyad) values, suppressing the followers of 'Ali and taking measures against the Christians. Certainly after his attempts to give a new vigour to 'Abbasid supremacy had run their course, the 'Abbasids never seemed to recover their energy. The reliance on freelance political and military leaders to run the empire under the increasingly nominal authority of the Caliphs was a symptom of the problem.

The empire had given up basing their forces on Arab recruits and began to rely on central Asian tribal commanders to serve as 'neutral' elements to control the Syrian provinces as early as the eighth century. This marked the first involvement of Turkoman tribes in Syria, where they were to play an influential role for much

of the next 400 years. One way or another, for most of the next millennium, Syria was to come under the sway of the Turkoman groups that flooded out of Central Asia, who initially 'came with no political baggage' and were marginal to the main Muslim community.¹⁸ At first they appeared among the military caste created by al-Mu'tasim's reforms (r.833–847) but their role was particularly prominent after al-Mutawakkil. The 'Abbasids began to rely on a mamluk-based military elite, recruited as young boys from the marginal tribes, to impose their will in Damascus. As the Baghdad Caliphate weakened in the face of internal unrest, it increasingly sought security through the services of its Turkish bodyguard.

The Arab supremacy established under the Umayyads had proved to be no more than a phenomenon of passing importance. In basing its power so manifestly on the fringes, the 'Abbasids disenfranchised ordinary subjects who 'found little reason to support the political power of the caliphate'.¹⁹ After not much more than a century of 'Abbasid rule, the empire began its agonising disintegration. The military dictatorship to which the 'Abbasid regime had descended meant that the Caliphs themselves were at the mercy of their own creation. 'Government functioned only as a vehicle for maintaining an army whose only function was to maintain itself'.²⁰ While the regime had imposed its rule on Syria, it had never imposed its authority and the constant rebellions weakened the regime's claim to legitimacy, eventually making it more vulnerable to the inroads of the Shi'a. The revival of Egypt as a separate pole of political power left Syria once again straddling the fault lines dividing Iraq and Egypt. In Baghdad the fiction of caliphal authority was sustained by the corps of Central Asian praetorian guards: the 'Abbasid empire became little more than a brand name granted as a franchise to whoever would agree to support the fiction.

Vast sections of the empire including Egypt under Ahmad ibn Tulun had fallen away by the second half of the ninth century. Ibn Tulun, a Turk appointed as 'Abbasid governor of al-Qata'i (now swallowed by modern Cairo) (r.868–884), refused to pay tribute to Baghdad and seized large swathes of imperial territory including Damascus and much of Syria (878 or 879). On arrival in Damascus, ibn Tulun symbolically underlined his respect for the pre-'Abbasid order, visiting the assumed site of Mu'awiya's burial and ordering that a peristyle be added to the simple hut that marked the place.²¹ The Tulunid line (868–906) was short-lived but its defence of its territory against a militant Shi'ite sect, the Qarmatians (to be discussed below), represented the first major challenge by a resurgent Shi'ite movement seeking to overwhelm the decaying realms of the 'Abbasids.

Shi'ism

In the narrative above, the story of the 'Alite movement was left at the point where it was discarded and broken by the 'Abbasids who were not prepared to encourage any competing claims to the Islamic succession. The 'Alite cause seethed beneath the surface for another two centuries, rising occasionally in local revolts. One of these regional movements developed in the area of the western coast of the Gulf. The Qarmatian (sometimes Karmati) sect which had sprung from the Isma'ili or

'severer' branch of Shi'ism (so named for their recognition of 12 Imams after 'Ali) represented support for the 'Alite cause in a new and savagely militant form. It spread its influence over much of the Middle East by the first three decades of the tenth century,²² its appeal reinforced by fiercely anti-'Abbasid propaganda.

In 902, the Arabs broke out of their stronghold in north-eastern Arabia, southern Iraq, and entered Syria with 'a new full-scale explosion of tribal power'.²³ In 905, Damascus was threatened by a siege. The leader, Abu al-Qasim, foiled the inadequate Tulunid attempts to defend Damascus from the invaders and returned again in 906. The 'Abbasid regime and its local surrogates had finally demonstrated their inadequacy in the face of a renewal of tribal pressures in a more focused, religiously motivated form. The forces, however, had overextended themselves and left Damascus. While the various 'Alite movements that now proliferated sought to make further inroads into Syria, especially in Aleppo, none succeeded in implanting their presence. In the 'Abbasid capital, the forces of Sunni orthodoxy had regained strength in the face of these many challenges. The codification of Sunni Islam around four main schools of Islamic jurisprudence was a firm reality by the end of the ninth century and gave fresh inspiration to orthodox Islam to maintain a coherent response to the many challenges.²⁴

Fragmentation (905–964)

By the reign of al-Muqtadir (r.908–932), however, the 'Abbasid state was sagging under the weight of its own pretensions. A vast court with elaborate ceremonial and concentric circles of praetorian guards consumed resources out of all proportion to the now feeble income of the state, eroded by bids for local autonomy. With the disintegration of 'Abbasid rule there followed one of the most confused periods in Damascus' eventful history. Ibn Tulun's move into Syria had again made the region a marginal area disputed between Egypt (the Tulunid regime) and Iraq (the Caliphate now increasingly under Turkish dominance in Baghdad). After the Tulunid strength had faded, neither of the major centres of dynastic influence, Baghdad nor Cairo, could impose its supremacy on the vast territories they claimed. The field lay open to adventurers from the fringes of the Islamic world, particularly Turkoman tribes from Central Asia. Damascus found itself with governors appointed seemingly willy-nilly from either Baghdad or Cairo, depending on which currently had greater reach.

A Turk who bore the name Tughj ibn Juff had led the defence of Damascus against them in 902 on behalf of the Tulunids. Three decades later, his son, Muhammed ibn Tughj, was given the Central Asian title 'al-Ikhshid' in 938–939 after serving as 'Abbasid governor in Damascus and Cairo. He was commissioned by Baghdad to set up what after 944 effectively became a hereditary principality in Syria and Egypt to protect the western flank of the Caliphate, ruling until his death in Damascus in 946.²⁵ The short-lived Ikhshidid dynasty (944–969) maintained Damascene independence against the rising power of the Arab principality of the Hamdanids in Aleppo (post-947), the Caliphate in Baghdad by now fully under

the influence of Turkish army commanders. The Hamdanids of Aleppo, while representing a brilliant flourishing of Arab culture, did not have the wider alliances needed to provide a stabilising influence in the region. They sought in Byzantium a protector against the continuing pressures from Iraq. Under the mid-ninth century Byzantine rulers, Nicephorus Phocas (r.963–969) and John Tzimiskes (r.969–976), Byzantine armies penetrated deep into Syria, retaking (after 300 years) Antioch and reaching as far as Damascus in 970. The Byzantine move had profited greatly from the confusion sown by another bloody incursion by the Qarmatians in 968. By 969 southern Syria was jammed between three competing forces, the Hamdanids and Byzantines to the north, the Qarmatians still pressing from the east, and another Shi'ite offshoot, the new Fatimid dynasty in Cairo.

Fatimids (969–1055)

A rival Caliphate had been established in North Africa in the early tenth century and moved to Egypt by 969. The Fatimids (ruled in Cairo 969–1171), a Shi'ite dynasty which claimed descent from the fourth caliph, 'Ali, would soon (973) establish a new capital, al-Qahira ('the victorious') on the Nile's east bank. Though its dream of displacing the Baghdad Caliphate was never realised, two centuries of Fatimid rule were to see Cairo outshine the glories of the Baghdad court, its prosperity initially underpinned by an open and relatively tolerant attitude to other faiths, facilitating the trade that flowed through the new capital.

Syria, and particularly Damascus, however, stood in the way of unifying the Fertile Crescent under the Fatimids' banner. Damascus had no sympathy for the Shi'ite cause which it associated with the bloody Qarmatian invasions and the anti-Umayyad obsessions of the 'Abbasids. Once again, Syria was stranded in no man's land with Damascus at the mercy of all sides including Qarmatian raiders who plundered the Meccan pilgrimage caravan in 966. When Antioch fell to the Byzantines in 969, Egypt was prompted to protect its position in Syria. The same year, a Fatimid army defeated the Ikhshidids near al-Qahira and Damascus was conquered by North African troops in 970. Damascus, as capital of the Fatimid province of Syria, fared badly over the century of Fatimid control and developed a particular antagonism towards the North African Berbers, troops who provided much of the Damascus garrison. While Fatimid control was often only nominal, frequent revolts brought brutal suppression which only inflamed the underlying Sunni Arab hostility to the Shi'ite interlopers.

It was with some relief that the city welcomed in 975 the offer of a Turkish adventurer, Alp Takin, to protect it against another Byzantine incursion commanded by the emperor himself, John Tzimiskes. This time the emperor may even have entertained pretensions of taking Jerusalem or even Baghdad but, after seizing Ba'albek, his efforts to move on to Damascus were foiled by the citizens' blockading of the Zabadani pass. However, Alp Takin's control of the city was weak and he could not directly resist the Byzantine demand for a substantial tribute. Instead, he tried diplomacy: he persuaded the Byzantine emperor to be satisfied with an

escorted tour of the city that his ancestors had surrendered 340 years ago. So successful was his charm offensive that all thoughts of a Byzantine annexation were put aside. The quasi-independence of Damascus, however, was short-lived and the Fatimids, in the person of Caliph al-'Aziz himself (r.975–996), wrested back the region from Alp Takin in 977 and finally ended the Qarmatian menace which had so long plagued the city. A Fatimid garrison was again installed and the power of the city's local youth gangs, often to represent a significant force in times of uncertainty, was tamed.

The first detailed Islamic traveller's account of Damascus dates from 985 with the visit of al-Muqaddasi, a geographer born in Palestine. His great work, the *Human Geography of the Islamic World*, contains a mixture of praise and criticism for Damascus: 'Nowhere else will be seen such magnificent hot baths, such beautiful fountains, or people more worthy of consideration'. However, he found nothing to recall the near-paradisiacal descriptions of the city's fabulous past: 'Damascus is pleasant, but its climate is rather dry. The people there are unruly, the fruits tasteless, the meats coarse, the houses small, the streets poorly ventilated, the bread bad and the resources of life limited'.²⁶ His long description of the Umayyad Mosque is particularly accurate, though there are some legendary touches; black polished pillars in the prayer hall, gold-capped columns in the courtyard. He notes that the Sultan's palace once again lay to the south of the Mosque from where the door to the place of prayer was 'plated with gold'.

The Caliphate of al-'Aziz (r.975–996) was a period of relative stability that ended with the succession of al-Hakim (r.996–1021) who reversed the traditional Fatimid policy of tolerance and alienated many with his lunatic pursuits. The leading historian of Fatimid Syria puts it bluntly: 'Unfortunately the man was mad; he began to kill out of need, then by preference and ended by spreading misfortune even to those he sought to protect'.²⁷ Local revolts broke out in Damascus and along the Syrian coast. Fatimid control had to be reasserted brutally and the youth gangs were again suppressed, this time terminally. In 998, hundreds of their leaders were invited to a feast in the bath of the Damascus governor's palace and hacked to death with systematic efficiency by the Berber garrison.

Al-Hakim extended Fatimid control over most of Syria (sporadically, in view of the 12 changes of governor between 1002 and 1011), actively seeking confrontation with the Byzantines in the north where the prestige of the Hamdanids was waning. While the Syrian Muslims of the cities remained largely Sunni, al-Hakim encouraged the spread of a new Shi'ite variation, a sect later to be named the Druzes after one of its early missionaries, al-Darizi, whose teachings suggested that al-Hakim was a living manifestation of God. Without, of course, actively endorsing such heresy himself, al-Hakim encouraged the spread of the doctrine which took root only in some of the more remote areas of the Syrian countryside, usually in mountainous regions which had only partly been brought under orthodox Sunnism.

By 1009 al-Hakim, free now of any internal restraints, had reached a peak of irrational self-indulgence. His destruction in that year of the Church of the Holy

Sepulchre in Jerusalem was a defining moment. Such a blatant act of anti-Christian provocation was a departure from the grudging tolerance which had marked the era but it was saved up to become a *cause célèbre* in the following century with consequences that were to last for many more. In 1021, al-Hakim disappeared during an evening walk near Cairo. His apotheosis was now complete.

Damascus, increasingly neglected under al-Hakim, now continued its slow decline.²⁸ In 1024, the Arab tribes of southern Syria touched off a widespread revolt against Fatimid control. The difficulties encountered in suppressing the protests demonstrated the weak Fatimid grasp in Syria and the declining financial resources of the empire. For a while, the Fatimids feared even the loss of their capital to a coalition of Arab forces. The Fatimids managed to cling on due to the work of a successful governor, Anushtakin al-Dizbari (r.1023–1042), a Turk who had the flair and the energy eventually to his authority over all of Syria. His decisive victory brought about a situation which clearly displeased his Fatimid masters in Cairo who had difficulty in finding the funds to sustain any military operations at this remove. He gained the admiration of his Damascene subjects and the Fatimid fears that he held ambitions to set up a separate state may not have been unfounded. Certainly he had salted away in his palace in Damascus a fortune later unearthed when he was hounded out of the city by Fatimid resentment of his success. He died in Aleppo in 1042: 'a miserable end for the greatest Fatimid Governor of Syria'.²⁹ Ironically, his reputation was later revived when the Caliph in 1057 had his body ceremonially transferred from Aleppo to Jerusalem, the honoured burial place for princes of Syria and Egypt of the period.

There is a gap of more than 20 years in the record of Damascus from 1041 to 1063. The standard Arab narratives give not even bare details of events affecting the city and once again it appears to have been bypassed by the principal currents of the times. Unlike Cairo, which was already a flourishing centre for creativity and experimentation, no buildings constructed in Damascus in the Fatimid period survive. The Fatimids regarded Damascus only as a source of grain and an occasionally useful base for campaigns against the Byzantines. They wanted Syria in their hands but resented having to spend the resources to garrison it effectively, even though the region could still be a useful source of revenue.³⁰

Damascus remained a shrunken version of its former self. It had no unifying framework of city administration, its economy enfeebled, its population greatly reduced. 'The city no longer had any sense of spiritual unity but was simply the sum of its separate quarters'.³¹ Each community looked inwards, haunted by the fear of massacre and civil strife. The Arab historian of the Fatimid era, al-Qalanisi, writing in the next century estimated the population had fallen to a few thousand; probably an exaggeration but an indicator of the city's steep decline.³²

Marginalised politically and economically, Damascus was slow to develop the religious class that was to support the development of Islamic thought over the next few centuries. If the Umayyads saw Damascus as a centre of faith, their emphasis was on the primacy of the Koran not on intellectual inquiry. The 'Abbasids had established Baghdad as their beacon of scholarship, usurping the role that older

centres such as Antioch and Damascus had once played in transmitting the intellectual product of the Hellenised world. The 'Abbasids, who knew no Greek or Syriac, relied on Syrian intermediaries in transmitting the classics of western science and philosophy into the Arabic canon. Individual Syrians who had preserved the tradition of relaying Hellenistic thought to the eastern world moved eastwards to Iraq to find a new audience for their translations and speculative work. Though there was some shift of Islamic scholars back to Damascus in the ninth century, only in the eleventh century was the drift decisively corrected (see page 171).³³

In spite of this uncertain exterior, Damascus in the tenth and eleventh centuries managed an inner life of sorts, often only rarely touched by events outside. The Arab population had long felt immune to the politics of its overlords. As the Fatimid empire began to break up and the 'Abbasid shell caliphate became increasingly irrelevant, Damascus found its own methods of shrugging off the ambitions of these classic Muslim bureaucratic states. Damascus had managed to create, partly due to the prestige of the Great Mosque, a reputation as an intellectual crossroads of Sunnism. The predominantly Sunni population maintained its own intellectual milieu, avoiding any defiant front vis-à-vis their Shi'ite overlords. It was accepted that religious and political power existed at two different levels and the local elite kept to the religious dimension: a far cry from the situation which was to develop in the next (twelfth) century when state patronage of religious education formed the basis of a Sunni revival increasingly intent on confronting the Crusader presence in the region.

At the political level, the inclination was to accept a strong (non-Arab) ruler almost consciously as a means of reversing the city's isolation and irrelevance. Such ruling figures in recent decades had typically been Turkish adventurers acting alone but able to empathise with the aspirations of the local community. As the Fatimids' predatory presence grew weaker, Damascus occasionally would experiment with recognition of the local supremacy of its northern counterpart Aleppo; itself often beholden to the Seljuk centre at Mosul in northern Iraq.

Ultimately, however, Damascus was learning to improvise, to survive by its wits, to preserve what memories it had of its great Umayyad (i.e. Arab) past. The French historian who has done most to track the events of this period from the Arab accounts, Thierry Bianquis, in his two-volume study *Damas et la Syrie sous la Domination Fatimide*, argues that the melting down of the great Islamic empires gave each city in between its chance to emerge as a new capital.³⁴ It was an opportunity that Damascus had seized in the past and was to do so again though not until well into the next century.

Seljuks (1055–1104)

By the mid-eleventh century, the Turkish presence in the Middle East had become more than a scattered presence of mamluks and opportunists. Whole tribes had migrated into the central lands of Islam. One group was the Seljuks who had moved into the Persian provinces from the ninth century. They became masters

of Khurasan and in the process devout Sunni Muslims. The Seljuk leader, Tughrul Beg, took over the role of protector of the 'Abbasid caliph and had conferred on himself the revived title of sultan (1055), exercising temporal power in cooperation with the caliph.³⁵ He brought an aggressively Sunni orientation to a regime that had been buckling under the weight of Shi'ite pressures in Iraq.

In the final years of Fatimid control of Syria, the regime in Cairo fitfully managed to find the resources to maintain their hold over Damascus. This was largely the work of the governor of Damascus (later of Palestine and southern Syria), Badr al-Jemali (gov.1063–1064 and 1066–1067), an Armenian slave who later went on to take control in Cairo where he sought to revive the splendour of the Fatimid empire, best commemorated in the surviving gates of the Fatimid city (Bab Zuwayla, Bab al-Nasr, Bab Futuh). It was too late for him, though, to save Syria. His rule was marked by violent hostility on the part of the Damascus population who rebelled against the Fatimid occupation in 1069. The rioting touched off an extensive fire which was started when the Damascenes tried to force out the Fatimids' largely Berber occupation forces. Large sections of the Umayyad Mosque were destroyed in the conflagration requiring several later rebuilding campaigns including the reconstruction of the north courtyard wall.

Damascus fell in 1070 to another in the line of Turkish adventurers whose raids were a fruit of this constant pattern of instability. A Turkoman chief, Atsiz ibn Uvak (r.1071–1078), ironically invited in 1071 by Badr al-Jemali to crush a tribal revolt in southern Syria, took the city and later succeeded in founding a principality on his own account. He profited from the uncertainty prevailing in southern Syria between 1069 and 1071 and the repudiation by Aleppo of Fatimid rule. The Turkoman was a freelancer, acting independently of the Seljuks who were now dominant in Iraq and northern Syria. The Seljuks had just delivered a strategic blow to the Byzantines in the Battle of Manzikert (1071, see page 177) and were clearly a new force to be reckoned with in the region. It took Atsiz several years to secure Damascus, requiring repeated raids and a blockade that had devastating effects on the city and its surrounding countryside. In 1076, Atsiz succeeded in establishing the first independent Turkish principality in Syria. Though loathed by the inhabitants of Damascus for his ruthless methods in forcing the city's submission, he sought to use it as a base to defy the traditional pattern: his principality spread north to Aleppo as well as south towards Egypt. The Fatimids responded ineffectively at first, finally in 1078–1079 launching a concerted effort from Cairo to dislodge Atsiz, who was forced in desperation to beat a retreat to Damascus from where he sought Seljuk intervention.

Atsiz had thrown himself at the mercy of Tutush (r.1078–1095), the son of Alp Arslan, a successor of Tughrul Beg who had seeded a new line of Seljuk princes in Aleppo. Tutush responded favourably to Atsiz and on 10 October 1078 the Fatimid army fled Damascus even before the forces deployed by Aleppo had reached the city. But the cost for Atsiz was high; his new protector distrusted him and had him garroted with a bow string. Tutush proceeded to set up a broader principality that covered southern Syria including Jerusalem. Aleppo and Damascus, the two

main principalities now enfranchised by the 'Abbasid Caliphate through Sultan Malik Shah (elder brother of Tutush), developed an intense rivalry even though established by branches of the one family. The rivalry was all the more intense given that Damascus remained a staunchly Sunni city, while Aleppo was still heavily influenced by Shi'ism. In 1086, Tutush took advantage of a succession crisis to take Aleppo, thus achieving the first reunification of Syria for over two centuries. Tutush, however, was not to enjoy the fruits of his victory as the sultan intervened to put Aleppo under his own direct control.

There were economic factors behind the renewed interest in the mastery of Syria. Two rival routes had served as a conduit for Asian luxury goods reaching the Mediterranean ports and, from there, the markets of Europe. The Fatimids had successfully established the importance of their new centre, Cairo, as an entrepôt for the Red Sea route but the Seljuks could see considerable gains in maintaining the key role of Iraq in intercontinental traffic. The merchants of Aleppo and Damascus greeted the extension of Seljuk power with some relief, hoping to find a new stability that would open further the northern thoroughfare. The Fatimids' attempts to recover their foothold in Syria reflected in particular the continued importance of the coastal entrepôts in eastern trade.

In 1095, Tutush died campaigning in Persia. The Seljuk dynasty was thrown into chaos and Syria was now divided between two competing sons of Tutush. In Damascus, the younger, Duqaq (r.1095–1104), seized the principality before his Aleppo brother, Ridwan (r.1095–1113) could prevent him. With the help of his mentor (*atabeg*), Tughtagin, Duqaq established a distinct identity for his southern Syria principality, based on Damascus, and forged a stable bond between the city and its ruler, ending the rule by adventurers that had marked the first phase of Turkoman rule.

Arrival of the Burids (1104)

Duqaq died in 1104, possibly at the instigation of Tughtagin who now ruled openly in his own right in Damascus, establishing the Burid line. (Initially Tughtagin ruled in the name of Tutush II, Duqaq's son, whose death shortly afterwards may have been no accident.) He consolidated his role by a judicious marriage to Duqaq's mother, the remarkable Safwat al-Mulk. Duqaq and Tughtagin brought Damascus a stability and sense of purpose that had long eluded it. The local merchants liked the city's new trade role. The religious establishment and the Sunni population at large liked being part of a wider Sunni entity, the shell caliphate of Baghdad, shored up by the Seljuk sultanate based in Isfahan. Sunni Islam was again on the front foot even though Shi'ism still had a strong presence in northern Syria and among many of the isolated mountain people. The Muslim world was still in no shape to face the major challenge about to reach it in the form of the Christian Crusade for the recovery of the Holy Land, but without that Seljuk core centred on Damascus and Aleppo, the invasion would have been a pushover for the outside forces.

The establishment of a court at Damascus and the adoption of a conscious program of reversing Shi'ite inroads brought a new dynamic to the city's religious life. We see after 1076 the beginnings of a new interaction between the ruling families of Damascus and the city's religious establishment.³⁶ Private endowments now began to flow, funding an expansion of religious life and attracting learned visitors from the Islamic world. These endowments financed new teaching institutions (*madrasas*, discussed below) and charitable foundations such as hospitals (*maristans*). Noted scholars, perhaps as many as 1,000, in turn drew students from the furthest corners of the Islamic world. Damascus became one of the most important relay stations in the formulation and propagation of Islamic thought.³⁷

In parallel, the embellishment of the urban environment ended many centuries of neglect and destruction. We owe to Tutush's reign work to repair the extensive damage of the 1069 fire in the Great Mosque. In 1082 the dome was restored, its spectacular form impressing geographers of the era and inspiring a rush to emulate it in the rest of the Seljuk world, including Iran. The dome would later be replaced after the equally devastating fire of 1893 but we know of this earlier work through the first Arabic commemorative inscriptions to survive into modern times, preserved in the Damascus Museum.³⁸ The two northern piers supporting the central dome were strengthened by reinforcing buttresses which were decorated with Seljuk mosaics of which fragments survive.³⁹ The mosaics on the inner side of the transept façade (the northern internal wall) were renewed at the same time in a style that only superficially observes the Umayyad conventions. The mosaics are too high and too poorly lit to allow inspection but the buildings depicted (the bulbous and segmented domes, zigzag decoration and twisted columns) reveal a style that was beginning to show the Seljuk taste for more phantasmagoric forms.⁴⁰

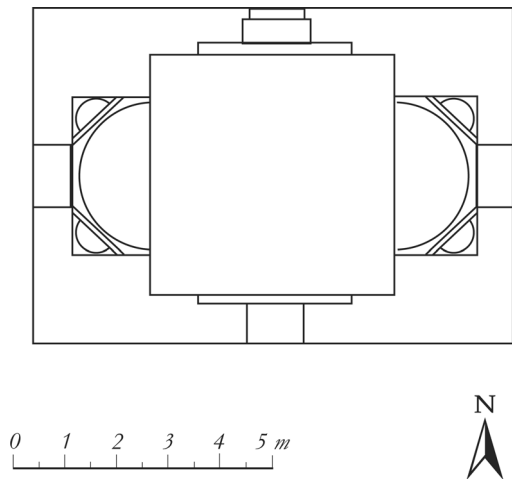


FIGURE 10.2 Tomb of Safwat al-Mulk

Source: after Sauvaget 1938

Seven years later, the eastern side of the northern *riwaq* or portico of the Mosque was reconstructed. The mosaic remains on the northern *riwaq* are thus largely Seljuk work, possibly incorporating Umayyad fragments.

Few of the other projects undertaken by the Seljuks, such as the first hospital in Damascus, built by Duqaq, have survived and are only known from written accounts. Duqaq's mother, Safwat al-Mulk, known to the chroniclers as the 'glory of the women of the world', who became wife to the next effective ruler, Tughtagin, survived well into the next century (d.1119). She was buried in the fine mausoleum of sizeable proportions that she had built in 1104 on Duqaq's death. The building was a first in several respects: first commissioned by a woman (later to become common practice in the period of Kurdish domination) and first Muslim 'monastery' (*khanqah*) with tomb attached. It was also the first monument since the early 'Abbasid period of which we have accounts. It stood on the Upper Sharaf, a slight escarpment outside the old city, north of the Barada River (north of the modern-day Semiramis Hotel and the intersection known as Victoria Bridge, see Map 6). The area was first developed for burials by the Seljuks and held a number of monuments and religious institutions.

We have descriptions of the tomb which survived, albeit in a ruined state, until 1938. Unfortunately, in that year the remains of this significant monument were taken away in a piece of thoughtless town planning which was to recur all too often in Damascus. This building, once richly decorated, could have told us much more about the background to the distinctive architecture which was to evolve in Damascus over the coming two centuries. It might have resolved many puzzles as to how the Damascus style was influenced by Mesopotamian and Cairene trends and how much the architectural traditions of late antiquity were still observed in the craftsmen's repertoires. It would probably have demonstrated that a native tradition was preserved in Damascus before the Aleppan influences flooded in during the course of the twelfth century. Terry Allen cites this monument as evidence that Damascus had managed to preserve much of the tradition of late antiquity in its architecture and was not heavily dependent on ideas reintroduced via Mesopotamia.⁴¹

A tantalising glimpse of the lost decorative art of the period is preserved in part of a wooden screen, preserved in the Damascus Museum, which probably once enclosed the tomb of Duqaq within his mother's monumental complex.⁴² A pair of Byzantine marble table tops, probably reused in Duqaq's building program as one carries his inscription, were 'rescued' by the notorious scavenger of other people's buildings, the late Mamluk governor, Sibai, and are still found in his mosque in the Suq al-Sinaniye.

Part of another building of the period may survive. Literary records refer to a house of the same period on the northern side of the Madrasa Zahiriyi which was later partly incorporated in the *madrassa* that was to become the mausoleum for the great Mamluk Sultan Baybars. A portion of the old house, originally built in 979, was preserved, namely the baths. Restored and reconstructed several times, those baths survive as a public facility open to this day: the Hammam

al-Malik al-Zahir. These are the first remains we have of the long tradition of the Damascus public bath (*hammam*), a proliferation made possible by ample access to flowing water through the system bequeathed by the Romans. By the next century, Damascus had 75 functioning *hammams*, a figure which would grow to 100 in the twelfth century.⁴³

To the years of Seljuk rule, too, belongs the first work on the Damascus Citadel. Since Umayyad times, the rulers of Damascus had felt no need to dwell behind defensive walls. The proliferation of threats from roving bands of adventurers changed the formula, particularly when one of those same groups settled in Syria and assumed power. They then felt the need for strong walls to protect themselves from the next marauders.⁴⁴ If there had been a classical fortification on the site, little of it remained. The first Islamic fortification began under Atsiz in 1076. Atsiz had clearly calculated that he needed some form of protection, given the threats that he faced from both Cairo and Aleppo.⁴⁵ But his work was unlikely to have advanced very far when a year later he was garroted by his Seljuk protector, Tutush (page 169). It was probably the latter who took over and completed the work on the first Islamic fortress. This included a residential complex, the Dar al-Ridwan, consolidated by Duqaq and Tughtagin. A few remains of the Seljuk fortress are distinguishable behind the later north-west tower and inside the southern wall.

First *madrastas*

During the rest of this account, frequent reference will be made to the institution of the *madrasa* or religious centre for the propagation of Islamic law. A *madrasa* is basically a mosque where teaching of law based on the Koran is imparted, usually to a group of resident students. The foundation is supported in the Islamic tradition by an endowment (*waqf*), often the income from a profit-making enterprise such as a bakery or *hammam*. Early Islam had no particular institution for the spread of religious, philosophical or legal knowledge from one generation to the next. This, as noted earlier, was done informally through the mosque and a few centres of learning (Beit al-Hikma) where ancient scientific and philosophical thought was also copied, translated and passed on. The tradition of disinterested thought became a victim of the increasing polarisation between Shi'a and Sunni but in tenth-century Iran and Central Asia new centres, often attached to the private houses of important professors, arose and first began to be dubbed *madrastas*. Soon purpose-built *madrastas* were constructed, adopting the plans of typical courtyard houses of the time with large *iwans* or high covered arches framing rooms open to the courtyard.

In the eleventh century, the Sunni revival adopted the *madrasa* as an important means of refining and propagating its thought. Each usually specialised in one of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence⁴⁶ whose scholarship had been refined during the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The public *madrasa*, open to any bright student, reached Damascus in the late eleventh century with the Seljuk princes. *Madrastas* began to be funded by government and were led by professional scholars, partly for the purpose of educating a class of civil servants.

In the two centuries following the Seljuk ascendancy, 86 *madrasas* would be built along with almost 40 other teaching institutions.⁴⁷ The new institutions were particularly concentrated in the area between the Great Mosque and the Citadel. The first, the Madrasa Sadiriye, was established under Duqaq in 1098 as part of the attempt to roll back Fatimid and Isma'ili influence. (If there are any vestigial remains of this important institution they lie somewhere under the paved square on the western side of the Great Mosque.) Another sign of the progressive outlook of the Seljuks was the establishment of the first hospital (*maristan*) in Damascus, the Maristan of Duqaq founded in 1097. It too has almost disappeared from the city's fabric, though a few years ago a French researcher discovered what could be segments of its walls on the eastern side of the Khan al-Sheikh Qatana, just west of the south-west corner of the Umayyad Mosque.⁴⁸

Notes

- 1 Blay-Abramski 1982: 97.
- 2 Sourdel 1999: 31 points out that the 'Abbasids repudiated the claim of the followers of 'Ali to have descended from the Prophet as it was based on descent through a female member of the family.
- 3 Crone 1980: 69.
- 4 Roberts 'Abbasids' in *EI2*.
- 5 Lassner 'The 'Abbasid *Dawla*' in Clover and Humphreys 1989: 248.
- 6 Across the centuries, rumours persisted relating to the tomb in which the founder of the Umayyad dynasty, al-Mu'awiya, was buried. A 'Tomb of Mu'awiya' is found east of the old palace area but honours a later figure of the same name and has nothing to do with the dynasty's founder. A separate tomb in the Saghir Cemetery has long been commemorated, the first accounts going back to the tenth century Arab writer, al-M'asudi – translated in Le Strange 1890: 234.
- 7 Sourdel 1980: 167.
- 8 Creswell in the second edition of *Early Muslim Architecture* (1969 I/1: 179) allows the possibility that the treasury was first constructed under the Umayyads given similar buildings erected at Hama, Aleppo, Ma'arat al-Numan, Menbij and Harran. King 1976: 65–68 suggests several possible eras for the structure and the mosaic decoration. See also Cobb 2001: 31 n.8 (citing ibn Manzur V: 30–31); Flood 2000: 124 n.56; Sauvage 1993 II: 273 (1896: 203).
- 9 Marguerite Gautier van Berchem in her study of the Mosque mosaics in Creswell 1969 I/1: 323–327 seemed inclined to accept an 'Abbasid date for the original treasury mosaics due to their inferior style – see pp. 353–354.
- 10 Ibn 'Asakir describes an eastern kiosk whose predecessor had been built in 979–980 – Creswell 1969 I/1: 179. Later accounts describe the building as destroyed in 1738. In fact, when the Syrian authorities stripped away the late Ottoman accretions in the 1950s, eight thin columns, classical elements in reuse, which appear on Pococke's plan of 1745, were revealed – Creswell 1969 I/1: 180. Rihawi 1963 gives an account of the restoration of the pavilion. The third pavilion of the courtyard, sheltering the central ablutions fountain, is a modern recreation of a late Ottoman structure. Akkili 2009: 92–99 discusses all three pavilions.
- 11 Muqaddasi (Miquel trans.) 1963: 172 and n.117. See also Bloom 1989: 60–61 for a discussion of dating and Creswell 1969 I/1: 177–179. Sauvage believed the upper section of the tower below the balustrade dates from the 1089, 1109 or 1174 rebuildings – 1932b: 27.

- 12 Cobb 2001.
- 13 When the Arab geographer Ya'kubi visited Damascus in the late ninth century, he described its use as a '*prefecture*' – see Ya'kubi (Wiet trans.) 1937: 174. See also Guérin 2000: 230–31.
- 14 Guérin 2000: 230; Rihawi 1977: 5; Dietrich 'al-Hadhdjadj' in *EI2*.
- 15 The precise location of Deir Murran, a Byzantine monastery complex which was a favourite resort of the Umayyad court and where the Caliph al-Walid died, is not firmly established – see Sourdél 'Dayr Murran' in *EI2*. Guérin locates it west of Salihīye and above Rabwe – Guérin 2000: 236 n.82.
- 16 Schick 1995.
- 17 Booramra 1997: 178.
- 18 Kennedy 2001: 196, 197.
- 19 Kennedy 2001: 197.
- 20 Kennedy 2001: 198.
- 21 Cobb 2001: 65.
- 22 The descendants of this movement are found in Syria today in the 'Alawi sect which is particularly strong in the Ansariye mountains south of Latakia.
- 23 Salibi 1977: 48.
- 24 The four schools of jurisprudence are: Hanafi (emphasis on personal reflection in decisions); Maliki (emphasis on Medina tradition of consensus and moderation) – both developed in the mid-eighth century in Kufa and Medina respectively; Shaf'ī (Imam al-Shaf'ī d.820 – more emphasis on community consensus, on Sunna); and Hanbali (followers of Ahmad ibn Hanbal d.855 – rigorous and literalist).
- 25 Bacharach 1975: 596–597.
- 26 Le Strange 1890: 225; Salibi 1977: 89. For full text – Muqaddasi (Miquel trans.) 1963: 165–175.
- 27 Bianquis 1986 II: 217 – present author's translation.
- 28 Bianquis 1986 II: 350.
- 29 Bianquis 1986 II: 516, 520.
- 30 A glimpse of a different environment, however, is provided by a curious inscription found at Rabwe, to the west of the city. This records in 1075 the consolidation of several *waqfs* endowing the sites of pilgrimage on the hill of Rabwe. Sourdél and Sourdél-Thomine 1980: 133–135 have interpreted the text as a new effort under Caliph al-Mustansir to encourage pilgrimage to this area, commemorating its Koranic association with Mary the Mother of Jesus, part of a wider Fatimid policy of encouraging tolerance between faiths.
- 31 Elisséeff 1970: 173. See also Bianquis 1989 II: 679; Ziadeh 1964: 19.
- 32 Examined in Bianquis 1989 II: 651, n. 1.
- 33 Sourdél 1970: 124, however, notes that Damascus was the location for one of the two 'Abbasid scientific observatories.
- 34 Bianquis 1986 II: 700.
- 35 The term 'sultan' has various meanings broadly indicating a person appointed by a higher authority to hold temporal power. By Ayyubid times it was fairly loosely used and could be held by several princes simultaneously as a personal title. See O. Schumann 'Sultan' in *EI2* and Humphreys 1977: Appendix.
- 36 Gilbert 1980: 106. Jalabert 2001: 22, 24–50 also notes the possibility that official encouragement of Sunni piety was part of a conscious program of providing new centres of pilgrimage to accommodate the upsurge of conversions to Islam in the eleventh century. This completed the process of integration of Old Testament and Christian legends into an Islamic context – '*une appropriation de territoire*' to smooth the transition – Jalabert 2001: 25.
- 37 Gilbert 1980: 111–113.
- 38 Van Berchem 1909: 365; al-Ush, Abu-l-Faraj 1976: 254 and fig. 145.
- 39 King 1976: 69–70.

- 40 Gautier van Berchem 1970: 301.
- 41 Allen 1986: chapter 1. See also Tabbaa 1982: 96–97; 1993: 30.
- 42 Meinecke, in Kohlmeyer and Strommenger 1982: 288; Abu-l-Faraj al-Ush 1976: 219 and fig. 123.
- 43 Rihawi 1977: 146.
- 44 Bacharach 1991: 125.
- 45 Muqaddasi describes the city walls as of mud brick during his 985 visit – (Miquel trans.) 1963: 165.
- 46 See footnote 24 to this chapter.
- 47 Gilbert 1980a: 119.
- 48 Sack 1989a: 93 citing observations by J.-P. Pascual.

ISLAM RESURGENT (1098–1174)

Bulwark against the Crusaders?

After the breathless rush of the last three centuries, it is necessary to pause at 1098. The kaleidoscope that constantly altered the pattern of Middle East history is now beginning to settle down. The ceaseless confrontation between Muslim groups, tribes, sects and religious leaderships is eventually forced to come to terms with a new reality. In 1098, the First Crusade assembled in Europe to march to the defence of the Holy Land against the supposed inroads of the infidels who were annihilating its Christian heritage. To a large extent the cause was a sham, based on distorted accounts of the Fatimid excesses under al-Hakim, transposed to the present and conflated with the news of the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 in which the Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantine forces, thus presaging the fall of Constantinople to a Muslim force.

For many decades, the region was slow to register the new reality after the arrival of the Crusader forces. To many, the invaders might have been just another of the exotic groups that had strayed in from the periphery, like the Turks or extremist Shi'ites. Egypt had withdrawn from Asia, showing only sporadic interest in returning. The Baghdad Caliphate was no more than a shell institution. It was a perfect environment in which the Crusaders could play off the atomised Muslim states against each other and expect little resistance to their initial inroads.

In Damascus, the nature of the new presence registered only slowly. Distrust between the principalities of Damascus and Aleppo was at a peak. Duqaq (r.1095–1104) was totally absorbed by his rivalry with other Seljuk princes to the north. In the year of the Crusaders' arrival, Duqaq had set off in the other direction: to conquer Diyarbakir. The power struggle among Seljuks was considerably more important to him than the threat from the west. He may also have been influenced by a letter from the Franks assuring him that their territorial

claims went no further than the territory the Byzantines had held in recent centuries. Duqaq did send a nominal contingent to stake his claim in the event of Muslim success at Antioch but his force was defeated and retired from the scene.

After the fall of Antioch, the Crusaders' transit across Syria was largely unopposed: 'Duqaq allowed the crusaders to march past him and take Jerusalem'.¹ Even the prospect of a Crusader Kingdom at Jerusalem left him unfazed, preferring the Franks as a buffer against Egypt. Duqaq favoured this option over a renewed Fatimid presence in the city and sent no forces to help the Egyptian garrison, remaining preoccupied by its rivalry with Aleppo that was notionally the senior principality. As the realisation sank in that the Crusaders were not just opportunistic raiders but a force intent on implanting itself for the duration, Aleppo and Damascus put aside their customary antagonism. With the restoration of Sunni orthodoxy in Aleppo, the impulsion towards the reunification of Syria gathered momentum.

Early Burids (Tughtagin, r.1104–1128)

Any policy of resistance to the Crusaders by Duqaq's effective successor in Damascus, the atabeg Tughtagin (r. 1104–1128), could only be an opportunistic affair as he could not afford a hostile posture that would expose the city's food supplies to constant interruption. At the beginning of his rule, the territory of Damascus nominally embraced the Beqa'a Valley, Homs, the Hauran and the Golan, as well as some remote territories in the Jezira. Jerusalem had seized Galilee and the Tiberiad, bringing its area of occupation within 100 kilometres of Damascus while Fatimid Cairo still reserved the right to claim the loyalty of the *amirs* of Damascus. Once the coastal ports were absorbed into the Crusader kingdoms in the first decade of the twelfth century, Damascus became more concerned about Crusader aims, particularly as they threatened its lucrative trade with Mediterranean destinations.

The first call for struggle or resistance in a religious context (*jihad*) was made by the atabeg of Mosul, Sharaf al-Din Mawdud, in 1109. Tughtagin called on Mawdud for support in his efforts to counter Crusader raids in the Hauran in 1113. These operations turned out to be surprisingly effective, almost threatening the Crusader hold on Jerusalem. Mawdud was assassinated in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, relieving Tughtagin of a dilemma as to how to persuade his ally to return quietly to Mosul without asserting wider territorial claims, perhaps over Jerusalem itself. Tughtagin's relations with Aleppo were equally complex. He could not do without the northern rival's active support to maintain pressure on Jerusalem, given the exposed front line Damascus presented along the present-day Golan. Given that an offensive posture would have been suicidal, Tughtagin had little choice but to make peace with Jerusalem and treaties were signed on several occasions (the first was in 1107). Under the truce of 1110 Tughtagin was forced to surrender his access to the agricultural wealth of the Beqa'a but he had managed to hold on to Baniyas below the southern slopes of Mount Hermon.

Ridwan, in Aleppo, aspired to play a more nuanced role between Crusaders and Damascus, against which he still entertained aspirations of his own but he faced his own threat from the Crusader presence in the north. Under the wily Tughtagin, nominally subservient to Aleppo, Damascus held the upper hand by setting Aleppo and the Crusaders against each other. In 1116, the honorific title of prince of Damascus was bestowed by the 'Abbasid Caliph. Though now more or less at the same level, Ridwan's distrust of Tughtagin became an obsession and he even had the Isma'ilis make an unsuccessful attempt on his rival's life.

Little remains of Tughtagin's building record except two inscribed panels above the doorways in the rebuilt northern walls of the Umayyad Mosque. These can still be found on the western side of the northern portico of the Mosque, the inscriptions modestly recording Tughtagin's role after the references to the Caliph and sultan.² The western side of the north wall of the Mosque (whose northern tower had been graced with its first minaret sometime between 943 and 985, see page 161) was reconstructed around 1110, though the job apparently had to be repeated at the end of the century.

The long span of Tughtagin's rule (1104–1123) helped consolidate Damascene preeminence. He was a popular figure with the citizens of Damascus, particularly as under him the city passed through a period relatively free of disease and famine. In his later years, however, the coherence of his rule was weakened by ill health and the excessive influence over him of the Isma'ilis who were even given control of the vital frontier post at Baniyas which guarded both the routes to Tyre and Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the first halting attempts to form a united front against the



FIGURE 11.1 Northern *riwaq* of the Umayyad Mosque with 'Minaret of the Bride'

Crusaders began in these years. The Crusaders' growing realisation that Damascus was the key to their long-term security in the region was met by Tughtagin's increasingly firm resistance. At the battle of Marj al-Suffar, 30 kilometres south of Damascus in 1126, Crusader forces had a clear win but were unable to press home their advantage.

Burids versus Zengids (1128–1148)

The death of Tughtagin at Damascus³ coincided with the coming to power in Aleppo of a figure who was considerably more ruthless than his predecessors. 'Imad al-Din Zengi (r.1128–1146), son of a Seljuk officer, already prince of Mosul, took power in Aleppo in 1128. Zengi quickly gained a mandate from Baghdad to extend his authority over Damascus where Tughtagin's son, Taj al-Din Buri (r.1128–1132), was nominally the new prince. In fact, power was effectively in the hands of the regent, Unur, who provided the element of stability while the principality changed titular head four times over the next ten years. Zengi was not prepared to follow the easygoing style that had patched together relations between the two Syrian cities for several decades, allowing occasional joint campaigns against the Crusaders. Zengi's first priority was not the Crusaders but to put Damascus where it belonged, firmly under his thumb.

Damascus felt increasingly caught between Aleppo's ambitions and the Crusaders' now well-established preparedness to take the offensive far beyond the borders of the Jerusalem Kingdom. First the threat to Damascus from within had to be dealt with. The growing boldness of the Isma'ilis, both within the city and from their new stronghold at Baniyas, resulted in a Sunni backlash. In 1129, some 6,000 Isma'ilis were slaughtered in Damascus, their leaders crucified and strung up on the city's ramparts. It was another stage in the reassertion of Sunni authority and followed discovery of a plan by the Isma'ilis to hand Damascus to Jerusalem in exchange for Isma'ili control of Tyre. The Crusaders sought to take advantage of the uncertainty that prevailed, unleashing an assault on Damascus by some 60,000 troops that reached as far as the Midan al-Akhdar, the grassy meadow south of the Barada, west of the present site of the Tekkiye Mosque and the National Museum. Buri, however, managed to counter with an effective surprise attack on the Crusader cavalry at Buraq, 40 kilometres south-east of Damascus, forcing a precipitate withdrawal and the abandonment of the Crusaders' efforts to take Damascus.

Jerusalem–Damascus–Aleppo

In retrospect, it might be tempting to see the persistent attempts by Zengi to take Damascus as an initial campaign to unite the region against the Crusaders but the concept of *jihad* as holy war to win back Jerusalem for Islam had not yet been adopted as a political cause. The shock of the Crusader invasion of Palestine had been directly felt in Damascus with the arrival of many families seeking refuge

from the Crusader takeover of Jerusalem in 1099. Like the Palestinian refugees of the twentieth century, they perpetuated the memory of injustice and fed the spirit of resistance through Islamic orthodoxy. Popular resentment against the Crusaders may also have been aroused by the first encounters between Crusaders and Muslims which brought a new dimension to wanton killing in warfare. However, the political class, insulated from the people by their separate racial origins, remained aloof until Tughtagin (who adopted the title al-Mujahid) saw advantage in taking up the call. The fact that by the 1120s the Crusader presence was lapping at the gates of Aleppo and Damascus, even spreading into Trans-Jordan, gave a new dimension. The 1126 and 1129 Crusader attacks on Damascus saw many ordinary citizens rallying to the defence of the city following the call to *jihad* from the mosques. While *jihad* became a plank of the Sunni revival preached by the religious establishment, the reality remained that the prerequisites for victory included the destruction of the Fatimid state, the extermination of the residual Isma'ili presence and the rolling back of Shi'ite influence in the north of Syria. While the political class dithered, the atmosphere in Damascus declined into morbid fascination with the squabbles between increasingly incompetent and brutal rivals for the throne, punctuated by outbursts of popular feeling by increasingly vociferous gangs (*ahdath*) organised by local bosses (*ru'asa*).

Opposed to the fiercely Sunni *ahdath* were Isma'ili elements from the countryside who managed to avenge official suppression of their sect by murdering Buri in 1132. He was replaced by his son, Shams al-Mulk Isma'il (r.1132–1135). The account of the Arab chronicler, al-Qalanisi, of Isma'il's many depravities and tyrannical behaviour makes it difficult to judge which aspect most influenced his mother in having him murdered. Another brother, Shihab al-Din Mahmud (r.1135–1139), replaced him but effectively it was his mother (Khatun Safwat al-Mulk Zumurrud) who ruled. Zengi decided that a marriage alliance (motivated by the need for a common front against new Byzantine incursions in the Orontes Valley) was the way around the lady's apparent reluctance to accept Zengid dominance in the south. This second Safwat al-Mulk accepted marriage with Zengi in 1138 with Homs as her dowry. Zengi's attempts to seize Damascus having been constantly foiled, his energies were deflected towards maintaining his position in Iraq. If he had not succeeded in taking the city, he was for a time satisfied that it recognised his supremacy.

After Mahmud too was murdered, for obscure reasons by members of his household, a mamluk, Mu'in al-Din Unur, took effective power as atabeg (r.1139–1149) and was determined to continue resisting Zengi's incursions in the south. Safwat al-Mulk Zumurrud, however, was now an enthusiast for Zengi's takeover of Damascus. Her marriage to Zengi had so far been sterile in political terms but he was happy to exploit her invitation to avenge her murdered son and revive his aspirations in Damascus. At Safwat al-Mulk's insistence, he resorted to outright assault, laying siege to the city (1139) after first taking Ba'albek. Damascus, having witnessed Zengi's wanton cruelty in massacring the Ba'albek garrison following their surrender, was all the more determined to resist. Unur rallied the resistance

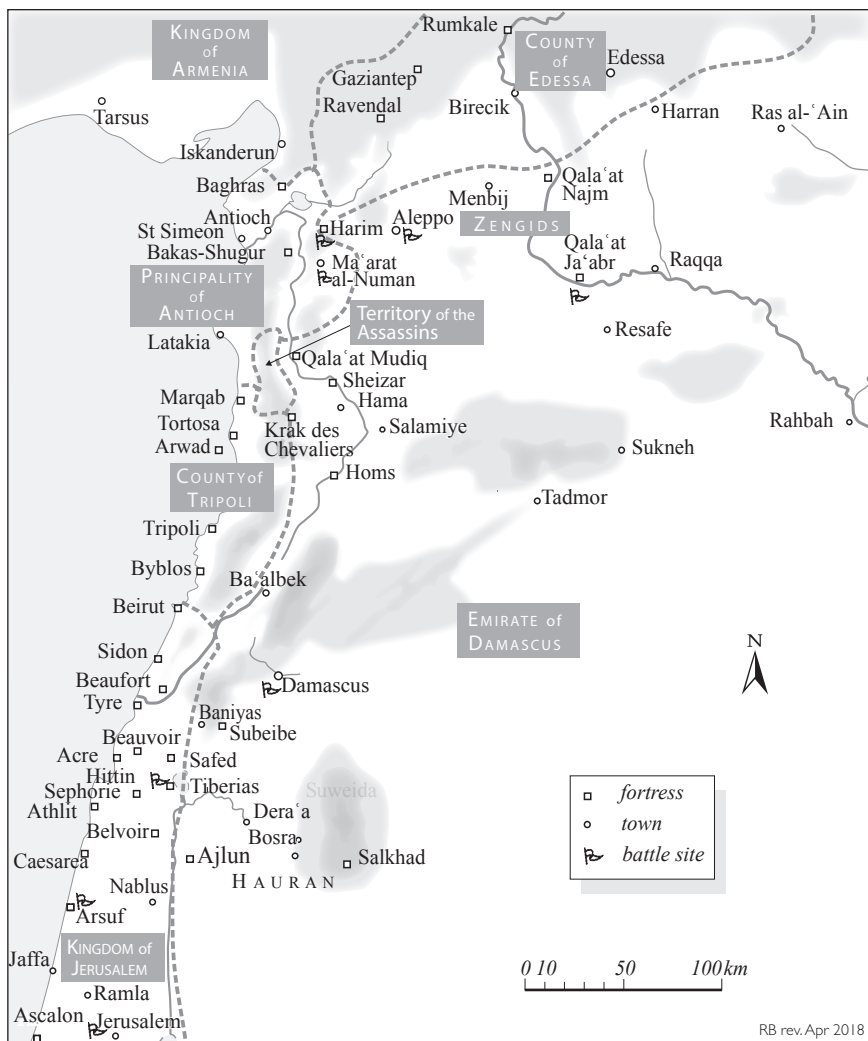


FIGURE 11.2 Zengid-Ayyubid Syria

during more than six months of siege and was sufficiently desperate to call on the Franks in Jerusalem for support.

Zengi backed off. He again confined his campaigning to the north: Crusader Edessa fell to him in 1144, ostensibly the trigger for the Second Crusade. The Damascenes were left with an abiding hatred of Zengi and a realisation that they could not ensure their independence against Aleppo without a protector. The only option available was to maintain an alliance with Jerusalem. A treaty was signed between Damascus and Jerusalem in 1139, openly promising Crusader help in the event of a threat from Aleppo in return for an annual tribute. So matter-of-fact

were relations with Jerusalem that Unur accepted King Fulk's invitation to tour the Crusader Kingdom as his guest.

This stand-off between Aleppo and Damascus prevailed until Zengi's death in 1146 (murdered in a drunken altercation) during the siege of the fortress of Qala' at Ja'abr in northern Syria. The steady rise to supremacy of Zengi's son, Nur al-Din, changed the Syrian equation completely. Nur al-Din embraced *jihad*, the pursuit of a Muslim's duty to roll back the non-Muslim invaders. No longer were the politics of the region inspired by narrow self-interest. The opportunism that tolerated alliances with the Crusaders ostensibly was now overtaken by ideological rigidity. *Jihad* was no longer the preserve of the Damascus religious establishment, far from the preoccupations of the worldly princes whose power bases in the north-east were safely remote. Popular outrage at the frequent dallying with the Crusaders now peaked. The two streams, religious and political, merged into one powerful flow. Territorial aggrandisement was not accepted as a legitimate end in itself; the abiding duty was to unite all Muslim forces in the cause. Unur quickly recognised the authority of Nur al-Din in Aleppo, handing over to him the assassin of his father who had sought refuge in Damascus. A marriage alliance and agreed cooperation in securing the Hauran sealed the matter.

The Second Crusade (1148) – 'fiasco'

The immediate cause of Nur al-Din's rise to supremacy in all of Syria was the Second Crusade. The stimulus for a new expeditionary force from Europe had been the fall of Edessa to the Zengid forces in 1144. Crusader and Armenian delegations had visited Europe to drum up new support. This time, no less than two great kings, Louis VII of France and Conrad III of Germany, raised their banners and led their forces eastwards. When the French component of the Second Crusade reassembled near Antioch in March 1148 after a harrowing march across Asia Minor, it faced a number of strategic decisions. The most crucial: Should it attack Aleppo to 'strike together at the heart of Nur al-Din's power'?⁴ Prince Raymond of Antioch, anxious to engage the Byzantines in a strategic blow against Nur al-Din, led a group of knights of King Louis as far as the walls of Aleppo to persuade them how easy it would be to take the Zengid stronghold. Louis, however, had pledged to go first to Jerusalem, which his German counterpart, Conrad, was already approaching.

The subsequent decision to divert the new European forces against Damascus is now seen as 'a decision of utter folly'.⁵ It was confirmed at a splendid gathering of the new and old crusading forces near Acre on 24 June 1148. The 18-year-old Baldwin III of Jerusalem (r.1143–1162), his mother and co-regent, Melisende, the Catholic patriarch, the hospitaller and Templar grand knights and the leading barons assembled to welcome the German and French kings. The accounts from the time give no explanation as to what led to the decision to target Damascus. Runciman argues that Frankish interests were in retaining the alliance with Damascus, not driving it into the arms of Aleppo, but he perhaps understates the new dimension:

with Edessa's fall and the accession of Nur al-Din, whose ambitions and vision cut through the old parochial rivalries, an Aleppo–Damascus axis was now a reality the Crusaders would have to confront.

Faced with the choice between targeting Aleppo (the key to retaking Edessa, the ostensible reason for the new crusade) or Damascus, Damascus was, for many Crusaders, the obvious choice. Few newcomers appreciated the important role compliance by Damascus had played in fending off a unified Muslim front. Its name was more familiar to the western princes, its hinterland more crucial to securing the future of the Jerusalem Kingdom. Taking Damascus was the easiest way of neutralising the key node along the corridor running from Aleppo to Cairo. Above all it was 'a city hallowed in Holy Writ whose rescue from the infidel would resound to the glory of God'.⁶ To the forces fresh from Europe the choice of Damascus looked like not simply an impulsive 'good idea at the time' but a decision that made overwhelming strategic sense.

The problem was not simply choice of target but timing. The armies just arrived from Europe were untested, disorganised and had no idea what they were up against. The decision having been taken on 24 June, the three kings (Baldwin of Jerusalem, Louis of France and Conrad of Germany) with their armies found themselves barely a month later, on 24 July, camped on the outskirts of Damascus in the middle of the summer heat. Such were the sheer numbers involved in the Frankish forces that their first advance was unchallenged even as far as the village of Mezze immediately west of Damascus. Unur sent word to Aleppo, Homs and Ba'albek to summon support. By that afternoon, the French forces had reached Rabwe, thus controlling the city's water supply, and cleared Muslim guerillas out of the orchards surrounding the city. Within a day the Crusaders had pressed right up against the walls of the city, camping on the Midan al-Akhdar. The Crusaders were even speculating on who would be appointed as count of Damascus.

William of Tyre's account of the Crusaders' arrival at the walls of Damascus preserves some of the sense of awe with which the Crusaders approached the oasis city and its stark contrast between fertility and sterility on the desert edge. The inhabitants of Damascus must have been amazed at having been selected as the target for this hugely exotic invading force of 50,000 which, amid a sea of flags and crosses, arrived fully equipped down to camels for heavy baggage and cattle to provide fresh meat on the hoof. To the small Muslim garrison, all seemed lost and the people of Damascus, having witnessed dreadful scenes of carnage with their own eyes, began to barricade their streets preparing for hand-to-hand resistance.⁷

In less than 48 hours, in a sequence still hard to fathom, the picture suddenly switched. The wily old Unur rose to the occasion, setting aside all his previous conniving with the Crusaders and demonstrating 'commitment, tenacity and bravery as never before'.⁸ Unur led an energetic sortie that scattered many of the Crusader forces. Muslim reinforcements from the north began to pour into the city via Bab Sharqi and Bab Touma, gates that the Crusaders had omitted to blockade. Most critically, however, the Crusaders (apparently on the advice of the Jerusalem barons) precipitately abandoned their secure position to the west

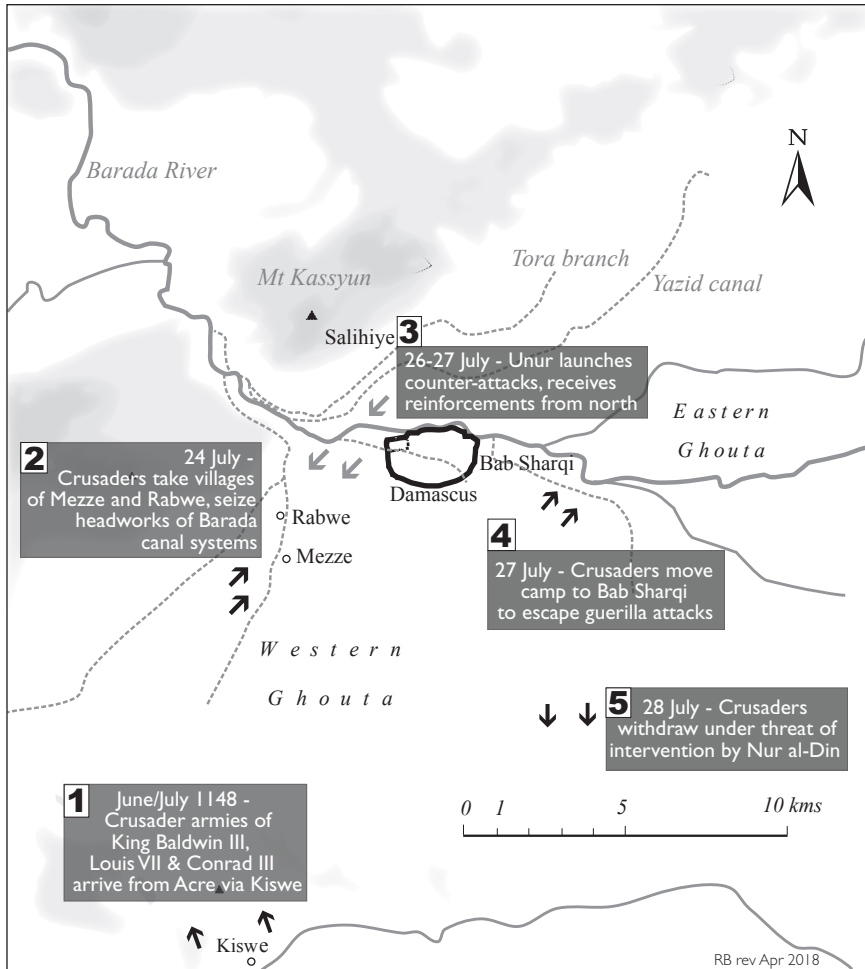


FIGURE 11.3 Second Crusade, attack on Damascus, 1148

of the city, fearing an escalation of the guerilla activity by which the Damascus citizenry were harassing the Crusader forces from the dense orchard plantations of the Ghouta. Fearing a trap, the Crusaders decided the more open country to the east would deny cover to the enemy. The entire Crusader army changed position on 27 July and with it the whole balance of advantage shifted. Now the Muslims had the upper hand. The new Crusader position lacked water and faced a stout stretch of the city walls from where they were exposed to Muslim raids that also cut off their access to Jerusalem.

The alliance partners now realised what a perilous situation they were in. Not only was the allied army threatened acutely by the presence of Nur al-Din's reinforcements only 120 kilometres away at Homs but Nur al-Din's rescue of the city

would inevitably seal the unification of the Islamic principalities: Jerusalem's worst nightmare. The only course was a precipitate retreat to avoid a catastrophic strategic loss. On 28 July, the armies headed back towards Tiberias but Unur did not let them leave in peace. The great expeditionary force was mercilessly harassed by Muslim light horsemen whose arrows picked off the peripheral troops, leaving the plain strewn with rotting corpses for months. Tensions caused the crusading forces to turn against each other and allegations that the Palestinian barons had secretly taken bribes from Unur to call off the attack formed part of the recriminations that closed the fiasco of the Second Crusade.

Citadel of the faith

It would probably be too rash to say that this act of folly was a turning point that eventually delivered a deathblow to the Crusades. Though their performance before Damascus was fickle, the Crusaders did, after all, manage to hold on for another 140 years. But it was a strategic setback for the Crusaders to find themselves without any potential allies on the Muslim side. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that any more nuanced policy on the part of the Crusaders would eventually have been effective. The passing of Damascus into the Muslim camp as the vanguard of *jihad* had been delayed only by the centrifugal forces that racked the Muslim world in the first half of the twelfth century. Nur al-Din brought an end to these 50 years of internecine rivalry.

This was the first major encounter between Damascus and Europe since the departure of the Byzantines 450 years earlier. It was also to be the last for an equal number of centuries and it left a deep impression on the city. Damascus was now committed to the cause of *jihad*. But the city was not equipped for its frontline role. Most evident was its lack of fortified defences sufficient to keep an invader at bay for prolonged periods. This had been first illustrated in the late eleventh century when the Seljuks felt the need to undertake some hasty work to establish a fortified citadel on the north-west corner of the city perimeter (see page 186). The 1126 and 1129 Crusader incursions had resulted in some more work on the Citadel in the 1130s under Tughtagin's son, Taj al-Mulk Buri, improved under the next Burid Shams al-Mulk Isma'il. It was still, however, far from serving as a fortified enclosure able to provide a safe and comfortable headquarters for the regime. However, for the first time, the Citadel at least provided basic accommodation for the prince. As Turks, supported by fellow Turks and a subclass of Kurds, the ruling class had felt the need to keep their distance from the native population. Only Tughtagin, who had long had his own accommodation to the east, closer to the Umayyad Mosque, preferred to lodge outside the Citadel.

Apart from this work on the Citadel, largely overtaken by later reconstruction work in the next century, we have few other remains of this period beyond fragments incorporated in later buildings. The Turks still considered themselves outsiders and only under the later Burids did the habit of marking their presence in Damascus in a physical way take hold.⁹ There was, however, some new construction

outside the city walls, particularly in the first extra-mural suburb to the north, the 'Uqaybe quarter. Built beyond the meadows of the Barada, and later extending to the neighbouring Suq Saruja and around the Dahdah Cemetery (site of the classical hippodrome), none of these early structures has survived. We see the start of a building boom associated with the promotion of Sunni orthodoxy and a hesitant cultivation of the memory of dynastic figures but nothing on the scale of that which would occur under Nur al-Din and later in the thirteenth century.

Literary accounts show that the main activity was in the field of Islamic institutions and memorials for the leadership. (Eight *madrasas*, each usually specialised in one of the four great traditions of Islamic thought, were established during the period 1098 to 1151, most in the period after the massacre of the Isma'ilis in 1129. Only fragments of these buildings are extant.) There was no aggressive move to change the beliefs of the residual Shi'ite community. Though they were clearly out of favour, they were allowed continued access to the Umayyad Mosque. A Shi'ite association with the Inner 'Amara quarter, north of the Great Mosque, remains. The main shrine in the quarter is now the glitzy complex of the Iranian-funded Mashhad Sitt Ruqaye, which has obliterated any remains of earlier shrines on the site. However, just to the north is an interesting mosque that has had Shi'ite associations since its inception, the Mosque al-Sadat al-Mujahidiye (1145).¹⁰ The Burid founder, Amir Buzan al-Kurdi, was to become a general under Nur al-Din but was incarcerated and died in 1160. The building, which lies just inside the Bab al-Faradis on the eastern side, though greatly altered over the years and somewhat the worse for wear, shows interesting indications of its long associations with this area between the Mosque and the northern wall. Many of its façade blocks are clearly Roman stones reused and an inscription in Greek dated 265, found repositioned upside down in the prayer room, records some of the contributions of the sons of one Sadat to the stonework of the Roman temple.¹¹

The dwindling strength of the non-Muslim communities was shown by what we know of the building record. The number of churches continued to decline and the first signs emerge of the geographical marginalisation of the Christian and Jewish communities; towards the north-east corner of the old city (in the case of the Christians) and the south-east (the Jews). Few churches managed to survive with their Byzantine splendour intact, partly the heritage of Fatimid efforts to divert church funds to the repair of mosques.¹² The Christians were still divided between the Melkite and Jacobite rites, reflecting the old divisions between Orthodox and Monophysite, respectively, with the Orthodox in the majority. Only a few Christians held senior positions in the administration, largely in roles demanding financial and medical skills.

Religion was the best bridge by which the non-Arab military ruling caste could draw closer to the largely Sunni population of Damascus. Promotion of Sunni orthodoxy became an important way of winning support from the city's religious leadership. Prominent teachers began to be attracted back to Damascus from Iraq and Iran. The religious leadership became a full-time profession with a better system of financial support. The posts of *qadi* (judge administering Islamic law), his

deputy (*na'ib*) and the *imam* of the Umayyad Mosque began to develop into prestigious appointments.

Religious life still centred on the Great Mosque of the Umayyads. At the beginning of the Seljuk period the Mosque had been in chaos: the result both of religious strife between Shi'a and Sunnis and of the destruction unleashed by the anti-Fatimid riots of 1069. Gradually, the teaching activities of the Mosque were brought back to an orthodox path and the prayer hall continued to house informal classes under the tutelage of masters of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence, even after the creation of separate *madrasas*. One of the circles was led by the great Arab historian Ibn al-'Asakir (1105–1176), whose survey of the history of Damascus covers 80 volumes and took 30 years to write (1134–1164). It is a still barely exploited mine of information on the city's history from the Muslim conquest.¹³

While Damascus was the nearest major Muslim city to Jerusalem, it was not a frontline city. The long stretch of open plain between Kiswe on the 'Awaj River (18 kilometres south) and the edge of the Golan escarpment was a sort of free-fire zone constantly open to Crusader raids and loosely controlled by local tribal lords who retained their freedom of action. The zone was extensive enough, however, to ensure that the raids rarely penetrated as far as Damascus. No one felt the need to build fortified points between Damascus and the slopes of Mount Hermon or the Yarmuk River. This natural buffer could be guarded along its eastern limits by the forts at Salkhad (first stronghold established by the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir in 1073) and at Bosra (initially a Fatimid-Seljuk fortification), given the increasing need to safeguard the inland lifeline between Syria and Egypt. This was to be a greater priority after Egypt too became drawn directly into the anti-Crusader struggle with the Third Crusade.

Jihad!

More crucial at this time than the status of Damascus as a physical citadel of Islam was the further growth in its role as a religious stronghold. We have seen that the city's first reaction to the Crusader Christian presence 80 kilometres away on the Golan escarpment had been one of caution. Damascus still resented the rule of the Shi'ite dynasty of the Fatimids and the excesses their beliefs had provoked. Intruders of all stripes were relatively common and who would initially have envisaged that the Franks intended a permanent presence? The Turkish leaders of Damascus were prepared to take up arms against the Crusader presence but only to defend their own territory, not to aid the Islamic community as a whole. The reality was that if neither Baghdad nor Cairo would take on the challenge, why should relatively tiny Damascus? Under the wide umbrella of Baghdad, each principality could fight or pact with the Crusaders as they sought to gain advantage against each other. There was little sense of any common cause. Damascene religious figures responded to the First Crusade by preaching a form of spiritual realignment or 'moral rearmament' in Islam.¹⁴ This perhaps reflected the trend towards an Islamic inner revival following the years spent in Damascus by the great philosopher and

advocate of self-awareness, al-Ghazali (d.1111), a sort of mainstream Sunni version of Sufism. While the first foundations of the resistance mentality had been laid and *jihad* was often preached in the Great Mosque in Damascus (including by Ibn al-'Asakir), it was not until the restoration of Sunni orthodoxy became the rallying point of the political leadership that Damascus' involvement in the *jihad* took on a military dimension.

Zengi was the first major political figure consistently to embrace the concept of *jihad* as a political movement. Once it became obvious, however, that Zengi's calls for *jihad* had as a first requirement his taking of Damascus, their appeal fell away markedly. There was still an underlying resentment by the largely Arab population towards their Turkish overlords, a belief that the Turks remained a society apart. The ease with which this could be overridden and common belief in the preservation of the supremacy of Islam put to the fore, however, was evident in the vehemence with which the citizens of Damascus responded to the *jihad* call during the 1148 attack on Damascus. It was enough for the Koran of the Caliph 'Uthman to be held up in the Great Mosque while the Franks were at the gates to inspire the citizens to the resistance which led to the humiliating withdrawal of three Christian armies.¹⁵

The Burid *amir*, Unur, lasted only another year after the Crusader forces were repulsed in 1148; enough time to lead the first counter-offensive into Baldwin's territory. His successor was the prince in whose name Unur had effectively ruled, Mujir al-Din Abaq (r.1140–1154). Mujir al-Din lacked Unur's manipulative skills in playing one side off against another. In the face of the increasing determination of Sunni orthodoxy to impose a united front, Mujir al-Din sought one more time (1151) to secure Jerusalem's help against Nur al-Din. This was too much for Nur al-Din who was determined, having gained full control in Mosul, to complete his pan-Syrian ambitions and no longer abide the evasive role Damascus was playing. If the rallying cry was to retake Jerusalem, Damascus was the necessary last stepping stone.

Nur al-Din, who had already tested the city's defences in two sieges in 1150 and 1151 could rely on the inhabitants' growing disgust with the accommodating policies of Mujir al-Din, who had even held a summit meeting with King Baldwin in front of the city's gates. With the Franks again on the offensive, Damascus had practically become their protectorate. Moreover, Mujir al-Din had acquired the reputation of a weak leader prone to lash out in violent attempts at crowd control that made him virtually a prisoner in his own city, sheltering from the wrath of the mob. Nur al-Din, by contrast, showed intense concern to ensure that any action against Damascus would not harm its inhabitants. His blockade of the city in 1153 was intended to build up pressure on the citizens and the religious establishment to force Mujir al-Din to submit to Aleppo and break with Jerusalem. On 25 April 1154, Nur al-Din was let peacefully into the city through the complicity of its citizens. His was a joyous triumph for Sunni Islam. Damascus was the steadfast centre of Sunni orthodoxy (unlike Aleppo, still under Shi'ism's sway). Damascus was the capital Nur al-Din needed to make the *jihad* credible.

Three centuries or more after Damascus had entered its 'dark age' of irrelevance and ostracism, the Burids had succeeded in reversing the trend. They had certainly not completed the reversal and the Burid princes' own hold on power in a still-fragmented region was not sufficient to give them the confidence to assert their own identity internationally. They had not the prestige of the Caliphate, the riches of Fatimid Cairo or the brute strength or ruthlessness of the Zengids. They still looked and behaved liked outsiders (Turks) in an overwhelmingly Arab city and their attempts to harness religion to their cause were repeatedly compromised by their own dealings with the Crusaders. Nevertheless under them Damascus began to develop a more distinctly Sunni identity; it became the capital of a cause. As the study of this period by the French scholar, Jean-Michel Mouton, has shown, the Burids laid the foundations on which Nur al-Din and the Ayyubids were to build.¹⁶

Nur al-Din (1154–1174)

With the arrival of Nur al-Din the city's new golden age began. We enter now on a period of building that is unmatched in any other century of the city's history: at least in terms of monuments that survive. Nur al-Din added lustre to the city's status. Damascus was the city that had survived best the waves of heresy that had swept over the Middle East for the past two centuries. Its Sunni kernel survived with a reputation for integrity and vitality that no other, perhaps not even Cairo, enjoyed. The religious establishment, the new wave of refugees from Crusader Palestine, the ordinary citizens shamed by the city's previous oscillation between subservience and opportunism, welcomed this man who espoused principled leadership and mainstream Islamic values. The city and the leader thrived on each other.

Nur al-Din recognised the strategic and symbolic importance of Damascus. There was much, however, to put in order and he was required for a time to appease the Crusaders in Jerusalem by continuing to pay the humiliating tribute which Unur had been forced to agree to. (The last payment was made in 1156.) Two serious bouts of illness followed by another round of domestic problems (and the constant need to campaign in the north of Syria) deferred Nur al-Din's plans to unify the Syrian forces against Jerusalem. A turning point was perhaps Nur al-Din's pilgrimage to Mecca in 1161. His subsequent adoption of a more ascetic lifestyle gave witness to his religious mission. Shortly after, a humiliating defeat at the hands of Byzantine forces near Harim on the outer reaches of Antioch gave further cause for reconsidering his strategy. Instead of the annual pinpricks each side had sought to deliver – in the Hauran, in the north or the Golan-Beqa'a area – Nur al-Din now looked towards a bigger picture and sought a more strategic answer to the containment and eventual defeat of Jerusalem. The answer was obvious: Egypt.

For decades, Egypt had been seen as an additional problem rather than as the key to a solution. Under the late Fatimids, Egypt seemed to have collapsed as a regional power into self-destructive introspection. No longer capable of playing a

role in Asia, it had been bypassed. The coming to power of a new king of Jerusalem, Amalric, brought a Crusader plan to use Egypt as the strategic depth to reinforce the narrow geographic footprint of the kingdom. Moreover, it was realised, if Egypt fell into the hands of Damascus, all would be lost. Nur al-Din sought to pre-empt a Crusader move by responding to the call of a displaced Fatimid vizier, Sawar, sending an expeditionary force under one of Nur al-Din's respected Kurdish commanders, Shirkuh, in 1164. On reaching Egypt, it became apparent that Sawar was more interested in playing Zengids off against Crusaders and that the realistic option was to take over the Egyptian capital to prevent it falling into the increasingly active hands of the Jerusalem king. From Damascus, Nur al-Din abetted Shirkuh's campaign by diversionary attacks on the kingdom (the important frontier town of Baniyas on the southern slopes of Mount Hermon fell to Nur al-Din in 1164) and by a clever propaganda campaign meant to persuade Cairene Sunni sentiment to identify the overthrow of the Fatimid Caliphate as a common objective.

Nur al-Din could not be entirely confident that Shirkuh did not have his own ambitions in Egypt, particularly as the commander had ensured that the Baghdad Caliphate had bestowed on Shirkuh personally the mission of wresting Egypt from Shi'ite control. After an indecisive battle south of Cairo (al-Babayn, 1167), Sawar's masterful ducking and weaving attained a new compromise. He accepted a Crusader garrison in Cairo but simultaneously pledged himself to support Nur al-Din's cause. Shirkuh's force was withdrawn. After another false start, a third Zengid expeditionary force was sent in 1168 to seek more decisive results. The army assembled near the town of Sanamein (50 kilometres south of Damascus) in December 1168. Nur al-Din personally sent them off with a bonus of 20 dinars for each soldier.

The Egyptian vizier again sought to play one army off against the other as the Crusader king approached Cairo. Shirkuh, losing all patience with the fiction of supporting Sawar's authority, decided to take power in Cairo in his own name: an outcome that certainly went beyond what Nur al-Din had had in mind. A possible challenge to Nur al-Din's authority was fortuitously avoided with Shirkuh's death after little more than two months in power. While there were younger *amirs* anxious to fill his shoes, it was the young nephew of Shirkuh who was judged best successor. At 32, he was not expected to challenge the Zengid leader's authority. The nephew's name was al-Nasr Yusuf Salah al-Din (Saladin).

Saladin was the son of Shirkuh's brother, Najm al-Din Ayyub. Born in Tikrit in Iraq he had been educated in Ba'albek and in Damascus, where his father had risen to the position of military commander under the last of the Burids and governor under Nur al-Din. Though his initial experience had been military (he had joined Nur al-Din's staff in Aleppo even before the Zengids' march on Damascus), Saladin had served briefly as prefect of Damascus but seems to have enjoyed an early reputation as 'lacking in moral seriousness'.¹⁷ Saladin had been selected to accompany his uncle, Shirkuh, on the three Egyptian expeditions where he established a brilliant reputation for military prowess, particularly in the defence of Alexandria.

In assuming power in Cairo, Saladin worked in a measured way to install Zengid authority but he hesitated at the final integration of Egypt into the Sunni cause. In 1171 Nur al-Din sent Saladin's father, Ayyub, from Damascus to remind the young man of this piece of unfinished business; the dissolution of the Cairo Caliphate. Saladin began a program of implanting *madrasas* in Cairo: institutions that had been so successful in consolidating Sunni orthodoxy in Damascus. The end of the Fatimid Caliphate was facilitated by the death of the last Caliph, al-'Adid, later in 1171. The Baghdad Caliph was then quietly recognised in Cairo mosques, closing the 209 years in which the Shi'ite 'heresy' had had free rein.

The differing ways in which Nur al-Din and Saladin now saw the role of Egypt in an anti-Crusade were instrumental in fashioning their respective views of the position of Damascus. To Nur al-Din, Damascus was the epicentre of his principality; Egypt was a sideshow, useful for the revenues it might yield¹⁸ or in putting lateral pressure on the Crusaders and to that end worth restoring to the Baghdad Caliphate. To Saladin, Cairo was the great metropolis, the point at which extreme pressure could be applied against the Christian powers if they could be lured by its economic strength and its massive trade flows.¹⁹ For the rest of his command in Cairo, Saladin differed fundamentally with Damascus over what priority should be given to common campaigns against Jerusalem. He preferred to put off operations that took him away for too long from the consolidation of his power in Cairo and there was a particular sensitivity regarding the buffer territory still separating the two great Muslim capitals. These differences resulted in much tension between the younger and the older leader, unresolved at Nur al-Din's death. In 1171, Saladin's father intervened with his customary good sense. It was ridiculous, Ayyub pointed out, for Saladin to feel he could defy the leader in Damascus.

Think about it. If Nur al al-Din came into this room, even alone and unheralded, you and everyone else would automatically fall prostrate before him . . . If he wants to get rid of you, he doesn't even have to come; he can send a messenger.²⁰

The relationship remained a troubled one until Nur al-Din's death in 1174, particularly after the demise of Ayyub the previous year. Irritated by Saladin's reluctance to engage the Crusaders, Nur al-Din even planned a new expedition to Cairo. On 6 May, a few days before his death, the 57-year-old Nur al-Din was out on the Midan al-Akhdar near Damascus, keeping up his customary training, when he took ill. Taken to the Citadel, to the timber apartment he had had built in that austere enclosure, he died speechless nine days later, his throat constricted by pain, possibly from acute tonsillitis. After initial interment in the Citadel, his body was transferred to his *madrasa* on its completion in that part of the old city lying south-west of the Great Mosque: the first building to merge the Damascus and Aleppo architectural traditions and to incorporate a funerary chamber.²¹

Nur al-Din's sarcophagus can be seen, even by the casual passer-by, through the grille that separates the funerary chamber of the Madrasa Nuriye al-Kubra from

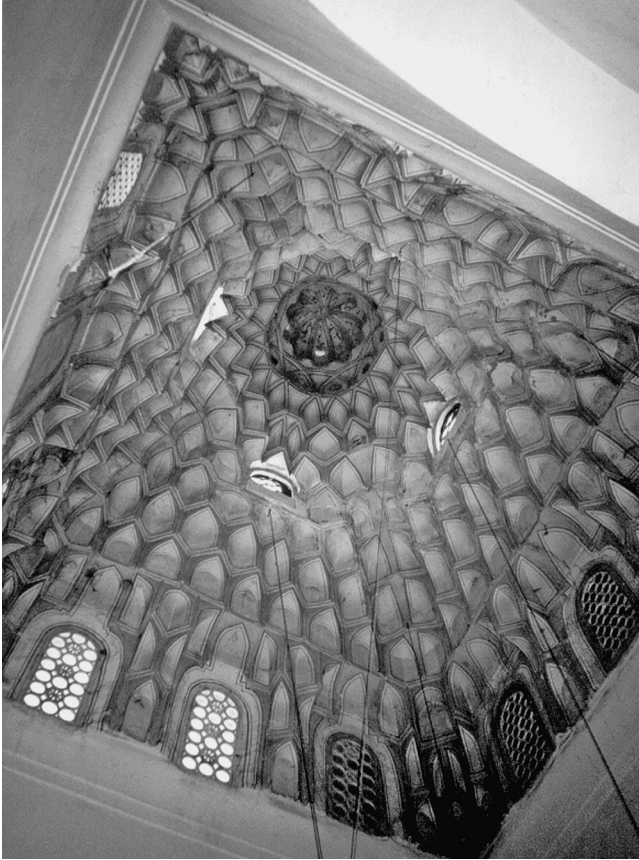


FIGURE 11.4 *Muqarnas* dome above the Tomb of Nur al-Din

the street. Above is suspended a rare example in Damascus of a Mesopotamian style of dome. One recent authority has rightly seen the stone- or brick-built dome, a cascade of *muqarnas* niches and arches so seemingly light in structure as to seem unsupported, as representing the vault of God's whole creation, reduced to exploded components of the elemental structural forces.²² Underneath its stunning but complex simplicity, this first truly great leader of the Muslim world for many centuries lies in austere repose: one of the most understated mausoleums of any great historical figure, almost lost today amid the work-a-day world of the bazaar.

Nur al-Din was a remarkable leader who rode above the petty power play of the Turkish leaders of the time, constantly jockeying for advantage and ready to play the Crusaders' game. By a steadiness of purpose and clarity of vision that surpassed his predecessors of many centuries, he kept to a path that integrated the military, political and religious dimensions of his vision. He went far beyond his excessively ruthless father in setting the counter-Crusade on an irreversible course. His vision

was taken further by Saladin but not enhanced. Nur al-Din brought an integrity and sense of purpose to the Muslim world that it had long lacked. Later, Saladin may have carried his aims forward by retaking Jerusalem for Islam but he could not better his mentor's vision of a just society firmly based on core Islamic traditions.

Nur al-Din's monuments

For 20 years, Nur al-Din had nourished Damascus as his spiritual and strategic base. The imprint he left on the city is still remarkable. This account no longer has to rely on fragments, reconstructions or memories. Nur al-Din's legacy lives. He brought security to a city that had long been the prey of gangs, quarter bosses and undisciplined (usually non-Arab) garrison troops. His legacy is not confined to the upgrading of the city walls and its defensive features; he profoundly influenced its religious life. The institutions endowed as part of his program of religious revival profoundly changed the character of Damascus. He brought a revolution, but one based on old values and on reconciliation. The middle class and the 'turbanned' (religious) elite no longer felt alienated from their non-Arab rulers. Finally, his civil institutions do not pass without notice. Municipal administration became a central government function. Although the post of governor (*walī*) of Damascus was usually a military appointment, the holder supervised the civil administration. Public works, including the water supply (still largely a legacy of the classical city), were given a new emphasis after centuries of neglect.

Nur al-Din's building program particularly reinvigorated the area of the old city south and west of the Umayyad Mosque. If any remains of the Byzantine or Umayyad town houses still survived, they were now swept away in the rash of new civic and religious projects in the area. Here was founded the first surviving hospital of the Islamic world, testimony to the far-sightedness of his administration. When we remember that all this was achieved in a city whose population was still around the figure it had achieved in antiquity (page 80), the result is the more remarkable. The city's occupied area has been estimated at 150 hectares (including extra-mural expansion) and its population as perhaps no more than 40,000, lower according to some estimates.²³ For the first time for many centuries, citizens felt encouraged to build, to have confidence in their future and to spread into quarters outside the city walls. We shall see later the importance of Salihiye but the same spread saw development south-west of the city beyond the Qasr Hajjaj and Saghir quarters in addition to the existing overflow into the 'Uqaybe area.²⁴ Damascus had 242 mosques inside the city walls and another 178 outside in the twelfth century.²⁵

Most remarkable was the development of a vigorous Damascus style which borrowed ideas, particularly from Aleppo but as far afield as Mesopotamia, and perfected them with an extraordinary mixture of restraint and flamboyance. Much depended on the bold use of simple elements of which the *muqarnas* was a crucial component. This device softened the transformation from one form to another by disguising the transition with an apparently complex geometry based on the simplest shapes. The *muqarnas* dome or half-dome, first introduced to Damascus, as

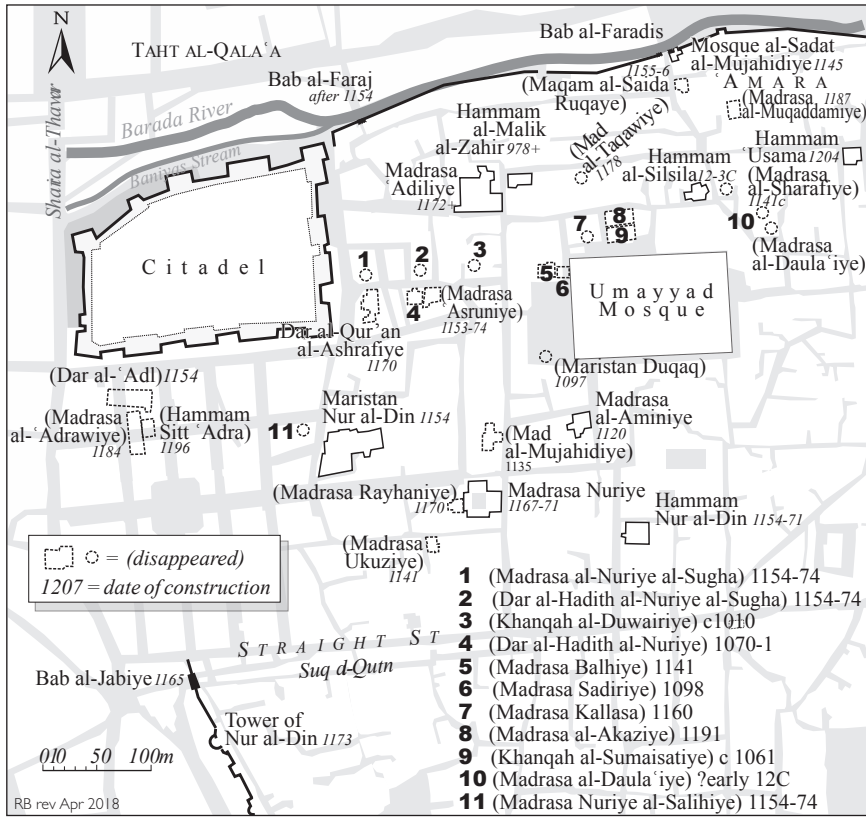


FIGURE 11.5 Damascus in the era of Nur al-Din, Saladin

we have seen, above Nur al-Din's tomb, later filled any number of different spaces, most typically the canopy above a recessed doorway, usually between the square frame of the door recess and the semi-dome above. This signature of the Damascus style later penetrated Cairo and became for centuries a feature of Mamluk and Ottoman architecture. Another Damascus invention was the use of sharply contrasting stone (*ablaq*), often a device that was perhaps a response to the two natural stone types available in the Damascus area: the pale limestone of the quarries near Kassyun and the hard basalt that existed in enormous quantities in the Hauran to the south. Again, first used on a major scale for the façade of Nur al-Din's tomb, it has held sway over the centuries as Damascus' striking contribution to the architecture of the region.

It should be no surprise that Nur al-Din found the Citadel in significant need of improvement. Damascus was now the capital of a major Islamic state and the Seljuks' hastily improvised enclosure needed considerable upgrading. The Citadel became his headquarters, supplemented by a *hammam*, a mosque and a *madrasa*. His official residence was probably the old Seljuk palace, Dar al-Ridwan, which stood

on the northern side of the Citadel, overlooking the Nahr Baniyas, the internal watercourse (now covered by the courtyard) which since Roman times had supplied the complex with fresh water. For his private use, however, he preferred a simple wooden structure which had been erected in the courtyard to minimise the risk of earthquake damage to its inhabitants.

The city walls, and part of the Citadel enclosure, were considerably upgraded with circular towers marking the Zengid improvements. (There is a very well preserved example hidden in the courtyard behind a small hotel off the Suq al-Sinaniye along the south-eastern stretch of the walls.) Several of the basically Roman gates were refurbished in the period 1165 to 1174. The Bab al-Saghir and Bab Sharqi still carry small minarets which testify to Nur al-Din's habit of constructing oratories on top of the reconstructed gateways. Bab al-Faraj (Gate of Deliverance) was a double gateway initiated by Nur al-Din, just north of the north-east corner of the Citadel. Only part of the southern gateway, Bab al-Handak, still shows Nur al-Din's work but it is worth noting the beautiful moulding of the eastern jamb of the north door, a rare surviving example of the Aleppo ornamented style. The northern stretch of wall between Bab al-Salaam and Bab Touma was moved 20 metres to the north to use the river as the new orientation line, a move also perhaps necessitated after extensive damage to the city's fabric during the earthquake of 1157. The well-defined, mid-sized blocks cut for Nur al-Din's reconstruction are still recognisable. They lie above the large regular Roman blocks moved when the wall was realigned, while the smaller, less regular Ottoman work was later added on top.

Nur al-Din was the first of the city's rulers to gain a reputation for good works. His first project, the *maristan*, or hospital-cum-medical faculty, survives today, one of the first buildings outside Iran to follow the four-*ivan* plan.²⁶ The entrance, stranded among the dense traffic and mundane shops of the Hariqa quarter, is a bizarre sight, a mixture of Roman pediment (quite possibly once surmounting a window somewhere in the Jupiter Temple complex) above a pair of ornate geometric brass-plated door panels topped by a shallow vault in exuberant *muqarnas* work. This façade of pure fantasy perhaps indicates how many remains of the ancient temple were left around to serve as building material.²⁷ The entrance is followed by a *muqarnas*-domed vestibule in the Mesopotamian tradition. (Unlike the stone vault in Nur al-Din's later burial chamber, two decades later, discussed earlier, this dome is actually plaster supported on a wooden framework suspended within the outer structure.) In this institution medical science was practised and taught at a level well above that of Europe at the time. Not the first hospital in Damascus (for Duqaq's foundation, see page 174), it became the most prestigious and a centre for the propagation of the exact sciences.

Nur al-Din's attachment to justice for all and protection against the whims of princes was illustrated by his decision on the day of his investiture to give concrete form to the Islamic concept of Dar al-'Adl, a form of Supreme Court, which he had constructed a little south of the present-day Suq al-Hamidiye. The building has all but disappeared (location, see Figure 11.5). Some 36 major works

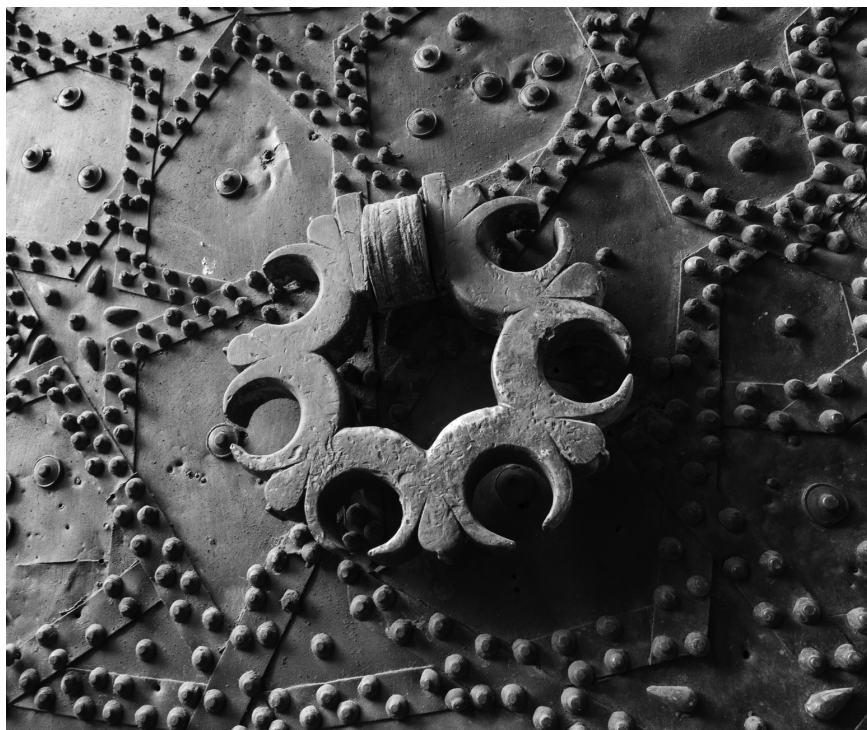


FIGURE 11.6 Maristan Nur al-Din, bronze door knocker

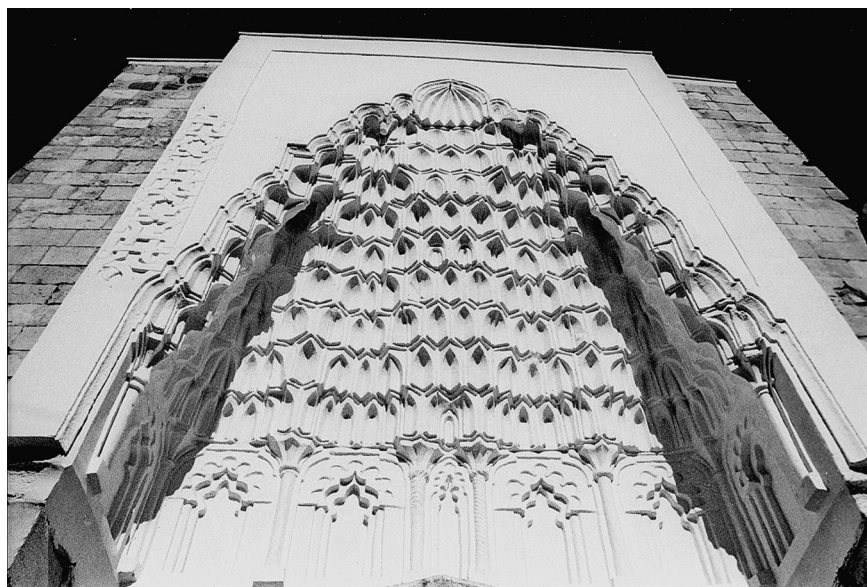


FIGURE 11.7 Maristan Nur al-Din, *muqarnas* gateway



FIGURE 11.8 Hammam Nur al-Din, dome of the dressing room

or reconstructions,²⁸ of which eight survive, were carried out in the 20 years of Nur al-Din's rule, a record that must have greatly stimulated the city's building program in future centuries. The sophisticated use of water to promote public hygiene was a feature of many of Nur al-Din's projects. This is most readily seen in the remarkable *hammam* or public bath, still in use, in the Suq al-Bazuriye, a little south of the Umayyad Mosque. There the visitor today can experience a *hammam* of Nur al-Din's time, the *waqf* or endowment from which originally supported his nearby funerary *madrasa*. Now trading as the Hammam Nur al-Din, only the Ottoman dressing room has been substantially upgraded since Nur al-Din's time.

Nur al-Din made only one minor contribution to the continuing restoration of the Umayyad Mosque: the mosaics at the northern end of the eastern *riwaq*, exposed only in 1953. Nur al-Din's most enduring legacy to the city's development, however, is the series of pious institutions which reflected his efforts to restore Sunni orthodoxy, buttressed by an enhanced role for Islamic scholarship and the proliferation of teaching institutions. Eleven such new institutions (doubling the number founded over the previous 50 years) were established under his rule, paralleling Nur al-Din's efforts to put the Islamic leadership ('*ulama*') on the payroll. The fact that six of the new schools were personally initiated by Nur al-Din indicates a new trend to institutionalising the *madrasa* as part of the official program of encouraging orthodox Sunnism. (The Seljuk and Burid *madrasas* were built on the initiative of members of the court, not the rulers themselves.) Unfortunately only two remain reasonably intact, the tomb-*madrasa* already described (and that in a truncated state after road improvements in the 1950s carried off most of its

northern *iwan*) and the incomplete Madrasa 'Adiliye (page 228), a project finished in the next century. All were relatively small structures, reflecting the fact that they were built for pious rather than pretentious reasons.²⁹ An analogous institution, the *dar al-hadith*, was more specialised in the propagation of the sayings of the Prophet. The first was founded by Nur al-Din in 1170 for Ibn 'Asakir.³⁰ Its façade survives in the Suq al-'Asruniye, parallel to the Suq al-Hamidiye on the north, its elegant doorway a reused Roman frame with a *tabula ansata* above.

A third specialised religious building was the *khanqah* or *rabat* (interchangeable terms sometimes translated as 'monastery') for Sufis or devotees of Islamic mysticism who sought to establish, through piety and self-denial, personal contact with the Creator. Examples had existed in Damascus since Seljuk times. Nur al-Din was at first opposed to the establishment in Damascus of a new Sufi institution (derived from Iranian mysticism with its suspect confusion of origins) but later came around to supporting financially the completion of the Khanqah Abu al-Bayan, whose remains survive in Bab Touma street, on the western side just before reaching Straight Street. Nur al-Din later (before 1168) took the initiative to establish another *khanqah* north of the old city (Rabat al-Tahun) and a new post of *sheikh* for the Sufi sect.

Perhaps most notable in Nur al-Din's architectural legacy is the revitalisation of building practice after centuries of undernourishment. The city's builders were encouraged to absorb outside influences after long isolation. No longer a struggling backwater, Damascus became the centre of a new creativity, drawing ideas such as the four-*iwan* plan and the *muqarnas* dome from Aleppo and Iraq but adding the city's own cachet.³¹ Moreover, it was a style that was not reluctant to borrow from the past. This can not only be seen in the conscious recycling of classical elements in new construction (the columns flanking the *mihrab* of Nur al-Din's tomb chamber; the classical door or window frames gracing the entrances to his *maristan* and his humble Dar al-Hadith) but in a strictly ordered and restrained manner, reversing much of the 'busy-ness' and exuberance of Byzantine and Umayyad styles. Two decades was too short a period to amount to an architectural revolution, and much of what was achieved obviously built on the work of the Burids and attained its full flowering under the Ayyubids, but the momentum created by the new surge of building under Nur al-Din changed the face of Damascus. It was now the second city of Sunni Islam, after Baghdad, and Nur al-Din gave it the prestige that went with that status.

We have already noted the first moves to settle the lower slopes of Jebel Kassyun which led to the second of the satellite suburbs, Salahiye.³² The area had been largely untouched; a sort of 'holy mountain' given its association with the story of Cain and Abel and with Christian asceticism through the memory of the monastery, Deir Murran, in which the Caliph al-Walid is alleged to have died.³³ The new settlement began with the Banu Qudama, a pious Muslim family who had fled the Nablus area of Palestine in 1156 and developed a Hanbali community initially congregated around the Mosque of Abu Salih, a 942 building located outside Bab Sharqi. Under the leadership of Sheikh Ahmad al-Qudama and his son,

Abu 'Umar, the largely Palestinian community took with them the 'al-Salihiye' label when in 1161–1162 they were encouraged by Nur al-Din to establish their *khanqah* at an existing Hanbali monastery on the Kassyun slopes. The Hanbalis comprised one of the most rigorous schools of Islamic thought.

While, in this case, Nur al-Din's primary concern was to end Hanbali–Shafē'i rivalry in the old city, he is also known to have encouraged the development of pilgrimage centres to attract Muslims away from the Shi'ite shrines and to build on traditions which in many cases began before Islam. In the case of Damascus, he built no specific monuments to encourage the trend perhaps because the associations were already sufficiently alive. Certainly, Nur al-Din encouraged the revival of the idea of Damascus as a pilgrimage centre, a 'sacred city': a trend to be given further momentum in the coming century. In the late twelfth century the quarter of the al-Salihiye began to attract more Palestinian refugees as well as pious foundations (particularly Hanbali) and more tombs scattered between gardens. The 'holy' status of the mountain was thus enhanced and the tomb of Abu 'Umar became itself a place of pilgrimage, later redeveloped as the Madrasa 'Umariye, whose ruined remains were recently under reconstruction.

A new 'golden age'

Now at the epicentre again of the region's affairs, Damascus was entering into a new 'golden age'. This atmosphere of confidence and vitality is conveyed in the description of the city given by Ibn Jubayr after his visit to Damascus in July–September 1184. His is the first description which brings the city to life. While its terms are largely euphoric, he includes the occasional less flattering practical detail such as the fact that the streets are 'narrow and dark' and its houses made of mud and reeds. The picture he gives of a city at its peak is probably fairly accurate. It had made a remarkable recovery by tapping into several trends. First, it had retained its Arab spirit of creativity and relevance at a time when Turkish and Kurdish influences dominated its military elites. This partly reflected the fecundity of its religious role, its consolidation of the Sunni tradition in the face of the Shi'ite challenge and its tapping of the knowledge and spirit of inquiry which had formerly gravitated to Iran and Iraq.³⁴ Islamic scholarship and teaching was now fully professional and the student body doubled in the course of the next century.³⁵

Second, the city became the key strategic centre for the Arab cause against the Crusaders, the stronghold without which effective resistance to the Crusades was unimaginable. Though in any major confrontation troops would have to be brought in, especially from Egypt whose wealth could sustain an army three times as large as that of Damascus, the Syrian capital held the key to north–south communications. Even if Arab unity was a fitful phenomenon, without Damascus it was not realisable at all. Damascus was still no Cairo, though it had for some time been the seat of a princely court. The new elite comprised the *amirs* of the army, the senior bureaucrats and the turbaned or religious establishment. The military elite were largely newcomers: either freeborn or mamluk *amirs* recruited mostly among the Turkish

and Kurdish peoples and trained from childhood for military service. While they were immigrants, they increasingly avoided any sense of a separate dominant culture and readily fitted into the city's Sunni and broadly Arab ethic.

Third, the city also found a new economic vitality. Though it still could not rival the riches of Cairo, it successfully tapped the burgeoning trade flow. This moved north–south along the relatively secure corridor that connected the main centres of the Muslim world. Ironically it also had an east–west dimension, funneling much of the commerce that was to end up at the Crusader-controlled ports. From there goods were traded across the Mediterranean, especially by the increasingly active Italians. Damascus was the trans-shipment point for spices, fabrics and gems from the east to which it added its own goods: silk, linen, wool and cotton fabrics of fine manufacture, metal inlaid work, filigreed silver and richly worked tapestries and rugs. There were already 22 *caravanserais* in the city at the end of the Zengid period³⁶ and this was slightly increased under the Ayyubids. According to the Arab traveller, al-Idrisi, who visited in 1154:

the city of Damascus contains all manner of good things, and streets of various craftsmen, with [merchants selling] all sorts of silk and brocades of exquisite rarity and wonderful workmanship – all this, such that the like exists nowhere else. That which they make here is carried into all cities and borne in ships to all quarters, and all the capitals both far and near. . . . The craftsmen of the city are in high renown and its merchandise is sought in all the markets of the earth; while the city itself is the most lovely of the cities of Syria and the most perfect for beauty.³⁷

Damascus certainly had not enjoyed Cairo's long period of prosperity and population growth under the Fatimids but as it siphoned some of the east–west traffic, its commercial heart expanded along Straight Street and began to embrace much of the area south of the Great Mosque. The military rulers tolerated a local Arab bourgeoisie. Housing was still modest and the tradition of building for domestic and commercial purposes largely in mud-brick wedged between poplar frameworks, with compressed earth for roof and floors, remained the rule. Stone was readily available but was reserved for more prestigious projects. The cramped nature of the quarters was perhaps exacerbated by some segregation of the population according to religious affiliation, reinforced by the practice of devolving to bishops or rabbis responsibility for the affairs of the minorities. The Christians and Jews thus continued to huddle around their churches and synagogues, the former suffering occasional reprisals for the worst of the Crusaders' excesses. The Jewish traveller, Benjamin of Tudela, visited in the 1160s and found 'a fair city of large extent, surrounded by many gardens and plantations. . . . in such numbers and beauty as to be without equal upon earth', with a Jewish community of some 3,000. 'Amongst them are learned and rich men'.³⁸

Somehow, Damascus also had to make room for a sizeable garrison. The core was around 1,000 heavy cavalry, a force probably led by 14 *amirs*.³⁹ In addition,

there would have been several thousand infantry and the sultan's guard (*halqa*) numbering around 1,000. Many, if not most, of the soldiery were non-Arabs and were probably lodged in a rudimentary fashion in the extra-mural extensions north of the city. (It is probably no accident that the horse and saddle *sugs* were still flourishing until recent times immediately north of the Citadel.) On the whole, though, given that the majority of the population had a common bond in Sunni Islam, there were few signs of resentment between Arabs and non-Arabs, by contrast with the outbreaks of the Fatimid period.

Notes

- 1 Fink 1959: 44.
- 2 Allen 1986: 7; van Berchem 1909: 32–34.
- 3 Tughtagin was buried immediately south of the later Mosque of Musalla on the eastern side of Midan Street, just before the present-day Yarmuk Square. The remains of the tomb have been removed since the 1950s – Moaz in Roujon and Vilan 1997: 137 and n.8.
- 4 Runciman 1965 II: 278.
- 5 Runciman 1965 II: 281.
- 6 Runciman 1965 II: 281.
- 7 Yared-Riachi 1997: 213–214.
- 8 Al-Qalanisi (trans. le Tourneau) 1952: 296.
- 9 Mouton 1994: 190 points out that 19 inner-city buildings were undertaken by the Burids but only two by the Seljuks.
- 10 Sourdel and Sourdel-Thomine 1980: 169. Mosque al-Sadat al-Mujahadiye – Moaz 1990: 91–99. The shell of one of the earliest examples, the Madrasa al-Aminiye, survives south of the Great Mosque as a commercial enterprise – Moaz 1990: 73–76.
- 11 Mouterde 1925: 353.
- 12 Jalabert 2002–03: 31.
- 13 A recent collection of essays highlights the rich lode of information available in Ibn al-ʿAsakir – Lindsay 2001.
- 14 Elisséeff in Schatzmiller 1993: 164.
- 15 Mouton 1994: 84, 379; Sivan 1968: 72.
- 16 Mouton 1994: 380. See also Burns 2016b: 129–130.
- 17 Richards 'Salah al-Din' in *EI2*.
- 18 Ehrenkreutz 1972: 99 records Saladin's sending of a caravan of gold and silver vessels and other precious commodities worth 60,000 dinars. Nur al-Din found the tribute wanting, preferring cash (gold).
- 19 Even during the period of peak confrontation with the Crusaders, Saladin was aware of the need to keep Egypt's international trade links open, even allowing Italian cities to set up factories (complete with a church) in Alexandria to supply him, *inter alia*, with war materiel – Ehrenkreutz 1972: 103.
- 20 Adapted from translation of Ayyubid writer, Ibn al-Athir in Elisséeff 1967 II: 673.
- 21 Elisséeff 1967 II: 761; Golvin 1995: 41; Moaz 1990: 111–115. Allen 1986: part 2 argues that Nur al-Din changed his mind about his planned burial in the Hanafi Madrasa Nuriye al-Kubra and preferred the new Shafʿi endowment begun in 1172, the present-day Madrasa 'Adiliye. However, the 'Adiliye was a long way from completion at the time of his death. Further delays were to drag on for 50 years, in which time the Ayyubids appropriated the building.
- 22 This idea is explored in Tabbaa 1985: 68–69. See also Herzfeld 1942: 11–14.
- 23 Elisséeff III 1967: 824; Bianquis in Garcin (ed.) 2000: 41.
- 24 Atassi in Gaube and Fansa 2000: 115–117.
- 25 Rihawi 1977: 58 quoting Ibn 'Asakir.

- 26 Moaz 1990: 378.
- 27 Allen 1986: 45; Watzinger and Wulzinger 1921: 40–41.
- 28 According to Elisséeff's list – Elisséeff 1949–51: 16–30.
- 29 For other fragmentary examples, see Moaz 1990: chapter II.
- 30 Elisséeff 'Ibn 'Asakir' in *EI2* reports that Ibn 'Asakir was present at the death of Nur al-Din. Ibn 'Asakir himself is buried in the Saghir Cemetery; Saladin attended his funeral.
- 31 Moaz 1990: 387.
- 32 For the first, Saruja, see page 187.
- 33 Mouton 1994: 346 and n.77.
- 34 'Damascus was very much the intellectual centre of the Empire at this time' – Humphreys 1977: 24.
- 35 Gilbert 1980: 124.
- 36 Atassi in Gaube and Fansa 2000: 117.
- 37 Le Strange trans. 1890: 239–240.
- 38 Adler 1907: 29–30; Signer 1983: 90. On evidence of a Samaritan presence, see Musil 1903.
- 39 Humphreys 1989: 161.

12

SALADIN AND THE AYYUBIDS (1174–1250)

Saladin's rise

The succession to Nur al-Din was a difficult issue. Nominally the choice was al-Salih, his 11-year-old son, but there was no established dynastic structure to tide him over to his majority while other members of the Zengid family were eager to retain a loose family-based arrangement. This system would clearly be threatened if Damascus went to an outsider. The greatest and most purposeful force in the Islamic world at the time, however, was Saladin, son of Ayyub. Nur al-Din had suspected Saladin of entertaining separate designs in Egypt, as described earlier, and relations had deteriorated immediately before Nur al-Din's death. Some Arab commentators anticipated that Saladin would prepare his forces to resist the arrival of Nur al-Din's army seeking to claim Egypt's contribution to the anti-Crusader struggle. Nur al-Din's death cut short any such dire scenario, though some biographers have suggested that the tension of these exchanges and Nur al-Din's possible preparations for the expedition were what induced the fatal health crisis on the Midan al-Akhdar, prompted by 'an uncharacteristic fit of rage'.¹ Saladin wrote from Egypt to pledge his loyalty to al-Salih but logically, now that the paramount Zengid was dead, Saladin's power was greater than any potential rival. More immediately, Saladin faced the compelling fact that if he did not move, Damascus might fall prey to Jerusalem: the Holy War would effectively be lost.

Whatever tensions had existed in the relationship between the elderly Zengid and his young Kurdish protégé, Saladin assumed the role of inheritor of Nur al-Din's tradition. Like his mentor, however, he had to calculate his moves carefully and avoid gratuitous confrontations with Jerusalem which would work against his long-term plans for *jihad*. He enjoyed advantages that his mentor had only fully come to appreciate towards the end of his life: Egypt's wealth and the income from its trade could furnish the sustained resources that *jihad* had lacked. Saladin's

position in Damascus, though, was still marginal. He could not reappear to peremptorily claim his right as Nur al-Din's successor; his arrival had to look like a response to requests to intervene. The young al-Salih had been moved to Aleppo, by agreement of the Damascus army commander, Ibn al-Muqaddam, clearing the way for Saladin's intervention. In Damascus, on 28 October 1174 after a carefully stage-managed popular groundswell, the 'gates were swung wide to welcome the new master' who had professed to have come 'only to serve the Nurid house'.² The popular welcome was genuine, based on hostility to the new concessions al-Salih's advisers had made to Jerusalem: 'We dawned on the people like light in darkness', Saladin modestly put it. He went straight to the Umayyad Mosque to pray. Showing his already strongly developed skills at propaganda, the righteousness of his triumphal arrival was quickly demonstrated by putting to an end the alleged excesses (alcohol, high taxes) that had sprung up since Nur al-Din's death. Continuity with his father's service to the Zengids was emphasised when he took up residence in the house that Ayyub had used as military governor of Damascus.³

There remained Aleppo, the north and the towns in between that were still manipulated by the forces of Mosul opposed to this non-Zengid takeover. The Caliph was reluctant to grant him supremacy in all of Syria. In April 1174 at Hama, Saladin was invested with robes of office as Sultan, the title inherited from Nur al-Din, by envoys of the Baghdad Caliph.⁴ His diploma recognised his authority over Egypt and Syria but minus, for the moment, Aleppo. In the uneasy peace reached in 1176, the north remained nominally in Zengid hands, rallying around al-Salih, but promised its support for Saladin's *jihad*.

Saladin returned at the end of 1176 to Cairo, his headquarters for the next five years. His early career had been spent consolidating his power in Egypt and it remained the base for his interests. He was later to realise, however, that Cairo was too far away to serve as campaign headquarters. Syria was a better springboard as long as two other dimensions were not neglected: the north and Jezira, the traditional seat of Zengid/Ayyubid power (and manpower); and Egypt whose resources made sustained offensive war possible. Without both, *jihad* could be no more than a fitful pattern of frontier skirmishes. Until he could secure these fronts, Saladin held back from acting as the inheritor of Nur al-Din's mantle. In 1181, the passing of Nur al-Din's heir, al-Salih, meant there was no impediment to his claim to all Syria. His most convincing argument was not a specious legal claim based on the Caliph's letter of investiture but the realisation that the fragmentation of Syria was inconsistent with the cause of *jihad*. After a long campaign as far as the Tigris, Saladin was handed Aleppo in 1183 as part of a deal under which the Zengids gained in return some of the cities in north-east Syria, including Sinjar and Nisibin.

After 1182, Damascus was Saladin's home base. He never returned to Cairo which was governed by trusty *atabegs* monitored by members of the family including his brother, al-'Adil and his chancellor, al-Qadi al-Fadil. Saladin still appeared reluctant to undertake a concerted assault on the Crusader Kingdom. The death of Amalric I (r.1162–1174), the 'last king of Christian Jerusalem worthy of his throne',⁵ had been a turning point but one whose import had not yet been realised.

The Crusaders still managed one-off raids (such as King Baldwin's in 1182 which reached as close to Damascus as Deraya). Saladin spent much of each campaigning year in restless encounters with his Zengid opponents or on pinprick raids against Crusader outposts such as those in southern Jordan. He hesitated, however, to launch *jihad* on a serious scale, having already signed truces with Byzantium that consolidated his position in the north. (A modern biography points out that by 1185 he had spent only 13 months campaigning against the Crusaders and 33 against his fellow Muslims.⁶) Several Muslim rulers of Damascus had discovered that it was one thing to rally the believers to defend the city against the Crusaders; it was another thing to summon up enough fervour for an assault on Jerusalem. Saladin's commitment to *jihad* remained at the level of propaganda, with the constant expeditions to the north-east justified not by simple territorial aggrandisement but by the need to secure all Muslim lands in support of the struggle. Many, however, might have wondered as the only gains against the Christians so far had been east of the Jordan where access between Cairo and Damascus remained only shakily secured.

A peace with the Zengids of Mosul in 1185 coincided with Saladin's recovery from a serious illness, during which 'Ismat al-Din Khatun, the widow of Nur al-Din whom Saladin had married on attaining Damascus, passed away. The next year, 1186, thus represented a psychological turning point, though his subsequent rallying of the Muslim cause may also be seen as a desperate attempt to salvage his regime from internal collapse.⁷ A standing army was assembled, finally drawing on the enlarged territory at Saladin's disposal. The next year saw a serious campaign to restore the security of the caravan route to Cairo, now threatened by the attacks of Reynald of Châtillon, a tempestuous noble of the Jerusalem Kingdom inclined to extremism and who had enraged Muslim opinion in 1182 by efforts to pillage the Mecca pilgrimage. After a particularly flagrant assault on a Muslim trade caravan at the end of 1186, Saladin believed he now had no option but a concerted push into the Crusader heartland, intended to provoke a set-piece battle with Crusader forces. This was his response to the taunt: 'Saladin abandoned the fight against the infidels and came to attack the Muslims'.⁸

Hittin (1187)

Compared with the previous pinprick encounters, Saladin's strategy leading to the Battle of Hittin combined haphazard planning with brilliant improvisation. Saladin assembled at Ashtara east of the Golan an army of 12,000 horsemen (including 5,000 from the Jazira and Mosul) and an equal number of infantry. The Crusader army under King Guy accepted the challenge signalled by Saladin's capture of the town of Tiberias and his move towards the plateau west of Lake Tiberias. To relieve Tiberias, however, Guy had to cross relatively waterless and open country from his rallying point at Sephorie (Saffariye), a difficult feat for an armour-clad army at the height of summer with no reliable streams or wells en route. After a sleepless and thirsty night, on 4 July 1187 the Christian army woke to find itself encircled by superior Muslim forces.

The torment of thirst quickly caused morale to crack. Count Raymond of Tripoli managed to break out of the trap to the north-east but the rest of the forces sought refuge on the 'Horns of Hittin', twin rises dominating the western slopes above Lake Tiberias. The remains of the 'True Cross', carried into battle as the Crusaders' talisman, were snatched by the Muslims in the *mêlée*; the rest of Guy's army was surrounded. By early afternoon, only a small core of Christian forces remained on the battlefield, rallying around the king's red tent pitched on the southern horn. In spite of their fierce resistance, the king and his escorting force were taken by Saladin. Reynald of Châtillon was personally beheaded by Saladin; the rest of the Crusader leaders were led in chains to Damascus where the nobles were set aside to be ransomed. The knights of the Hospitaller and Templar orders, who had taken religious vows to defend the Holy Land with their lives, were executed at Saladin's orders; the exceptions being a handful who agreed to convert to Islam. The relic of the True Cross too was transported to Saladin's capital, brandished upside down on a lance.

Many of the most significant leaders of the Christian kingdom were now in captivity. (King Guy was released six months later in circumstances that only underlined Saladin's mastery.) Hittin was a crippling but not mortal blow to the Crusader cause. Initially this strategic defeat led to the collapse of many Crusader cities including Acre and was followed three months later by the fall of Jerusalem itself to the Damascus forces. After 90 years, Jerusalem was again in Muslim hands and Saladin celebrated by attending Friday prayers on 9 October, the very day (27 Rahab) when the Prophet, according to Hadith, had been transported from the Rock marking the summit of the Haram al-Sharif to experience the presence of God himself. Saladin's victory enhanced Jerusalem's sacred status in Muslim eyes but he resisted calls to dismantle the city's Christian shrines. The western Christian inhabitants, however, faced the choice either of paying heavy ransoms for their release or being sold into slavery.

Saladin had achieved a remarkable victory but it was not total. In securing his propaganda coup in Jerusalem he had neglected the much more militarily significant target of Tyre, allowing the Crusaders to consolidate it as their last precarious foothold in the Jerusalem Kingdom. The coastal strip around Tyre now served as a beachhead for later replenishments. Saladin had united much of the Muslim world, but received little gratitude from Baghdad which still distrusted Damascene designs while his Zengid allies still resented his rise to supremacy. Moreover, Saladin feared that the Crusaders could use their remaining strongpoints (their presence in Tripoli and Antioch remained intact along with Tyre) to restore the Jerusalem Kingdom. Fearful that Europe would avenge the fall of Jerusalem and underwrite the recovery by sending replenishments by land through Anatolia, Saladin, in the following year, moved up the Syrian coast, picking off the poorly defended strongpoints and bypassing those that would require a lengthy siege; 'removing unguarded pawns from the board'.⁹

It was not enough to stave off a Third Crusade and the kings of France (Philip August) and of England (Richard Coeur de Lion) landed by sea and lent huge new

prestige and manpower to the Crusader presence. In 1191, the Crusaders retook the port of Acre after a prolonged siege and a wearying counter-siege by Muslim forces. In itself, this victory did not restore the Crusaders' losses but, given the port's important entrepôt role, this was a blow to Saladin's prestige, demonstrating that the struggle for *jihad* was still going to be a long one. The Franks had fought the confrontation back to stalemate and Saladin had been unable to establish the momentum to roll back their presence. The Crusaders now enlarged their coastal enclave with Acre as their substitute capital. A second major engagement between Saladin's forces and Richard's army near Arsuf in 1191 revealed how 'Saladin as he grew older lost something of his energy and his command of men'.¹⁰ Yet the Crusaders too had paid a heavy price for their victory in this five-year struggle. The retaking of Acre had cost them 100,000 men. The truce of 1192 that ended the Third Crusade was partly motivated on the Crusaders' side by the anxiety of Richard Coeur de Lion to return to England to defend his kingdom against his erstwhile co-Crusader, Philip. Saladin accepted a truce that allowed the return of Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem. He sat watching the men of Richard's army arrive in Jerusalem as pilgrims, facing the realisation that he did not have the strength of numbers, the enthusiasm among his own supporters (least of all from Baghdad) or the economic resources to follow through the brilliant success of Hittin. Moreover, he now lacked the zeal and resilience for a final push.

Saladin returned to Damascus to try to recover his strength after another bout of illness. He put aside a long-harboured ambition to undertake the *Hajj* to Mecca and contented himself with the simple pleasures of the hunt. One day in February 1193, he rode out through a cutting wind to meet the pilgrims returning with the *Hajj* caravan he had hoped to join. He came down with a fever and lay weakened, lapsing in and out of consciousness. His last words came in response to a snatch of the Koran that caught his fading attention: 'He is the God than whom there is no God; who knows the unseen and the invisible'. Murmuring 'It is true', he slipped, at the age of 55, into Paradise.¹¹

Saladin on his death did not enjoy among his own followers the peerless reputation for magnanimity that he was later to acquire in European legends of the Crusades. It was more on the side of his adversaries that he had won instant admiration for his chivalry and generosity in victory. His peaceful takeover of Jerusalem, his respect for its Christian shrines and their guardianship by the churches contrasted with the Crusaders' 1099 bloodbath, addressed indiscriminately against the city's Muslim, Jewish and even native Christian inhabitants. On the Arab side, his failures were as noted as his triumphs; his generosity and chivalry more often recognised as a failure to summon up the ruthlessness appropriate in a ruler. It could easily be overlooked that, as sultan, he was no absolute monarch but the leader of a confederation of principalities. He could not simply summon up the forces for a strategic assault unless his princes saw fit to contribute, which they rarely did.

Considerable as his achievements were, Saladin had little chance to savour his successes. His reign has been a restless attempt to build the momentum needed to roll back the Crusader presence. Even after Hittin and the taking of Jerusalem,

there was always the fear that the Crusaders from their thin coastal strip could seek massive reinforcements and return to the game of dividing and ruling their Muslim opponents. He spent little time in Damascus, though he had long felt most at home there and increasingly saw it as his base. Unlike Nur al-Din, he made few gestures to mark his achievements by embellishing the city that was his Citadel of Faith. His main building spree dated from his early years in Cairo (before 1181) in the form of that city's great Citadel walls. 'Excessive in scale and of doubtful utility',¹² they outshine in magnificence any works that he contemplated in Damascus and perhaps discouraged any further aspirations to outclass Nur al-Din. They certainly indicated that his priorities were very much Cairo-centred for the first half of his reign since no comparable effort was made to improve the defences of Damascus.

Nor did Saladin acquire the personal funds to endow new projects. He was a bad financial administrator and gave away to the deserving much of what he acquired. With 600 turbaned officials on the prince's payroll, he perhaps felt that Damascus' restoration to the bosom of Sunni orthodoxy had already been completed. The economic benefits that might deliver a grand building program were spent on war and good works. He remained a warrior not an architect; a lover of debate not a dogmatist; a jurist not a builder who craved symmetrical dimensions. Though raised in relatively grand circumstances (his father's house was later incorporated in the funerary *madrasa* of Sultan Baybars and can still be visited; *Madrasa Zahiyye*, see page 237), he was never happier than when sitting in Nur al-Din's Palace of Justice dispensing wisdom or when hunting gazelle out on the steppe, as he was in the last weeks before his history of indifferent health and colic fevers overtook him.

'The last victory'

The story of Saladin's burial in 1193 is indicative of the leader's lack of a monument complex. He had prepared no tomb to mark his demise, no statement of his faith in the world order of Sunni orthodoxy to match the sublime dome over Nur al-Din's resting place. Nor was his wish respected that he be buried simply beside the pilgrimage route where soldiers and pious voyagers could offer their prayers. Islamic practice required no delay before interment so Saladin was buried in the Citadel after being carried through the city amid scenes of unprecedented public grief. Two years later, in 1195, his remains were transferred to a special burial chamber just north of the Great Mosque, an area long associated with holy institutions, as evident in the complex building history of the area. A year later, the *Madrasa 'Aziziyye* was constructed around it on the initiative of his second son, al-'Aziz 'Uthman. Saladin's mortuary arrangements have been as cavalierly treated as those of his predecessor. Most of the *madrasa* has disappeared, probably as a casualty of the fires or sackings that have ravaged the Mosque. We have only literary sources for the commemorative inscription honouring Saladin: 'Allah, take his soul and open for him the Gates of Paradise. This is the last victory we long for'.¹³ Only the tomb chamber and an incongruous arch of an *ivan* survive.

The simplicity of Saladin's burial is totally consistent with Islamic tradition and his own modest tastes. It later gave some offence to the more pompous and insecure Ottoman sultan, 'Abdulhamid II. He had the simple wooden sarcophagus moved

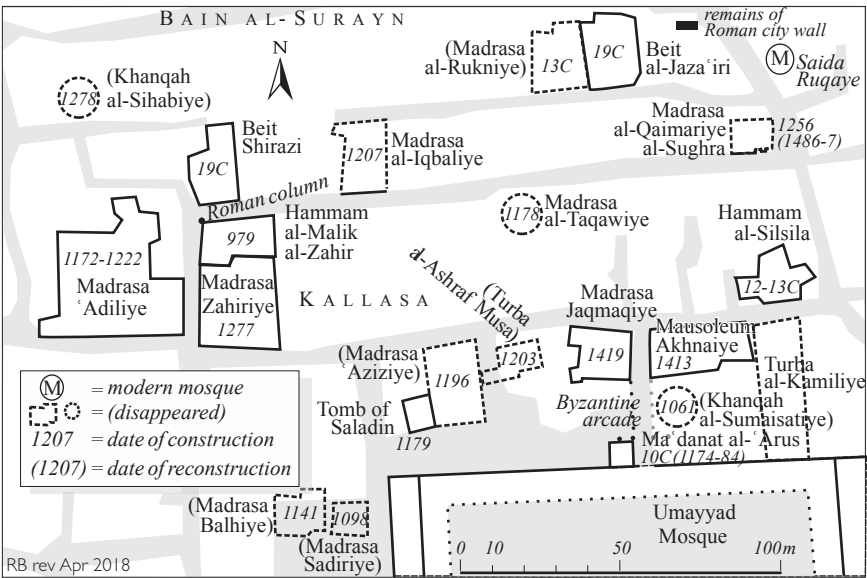


FIGURE 12.1 Ayyubid necropolis, north-west of the Umayyad Mosque

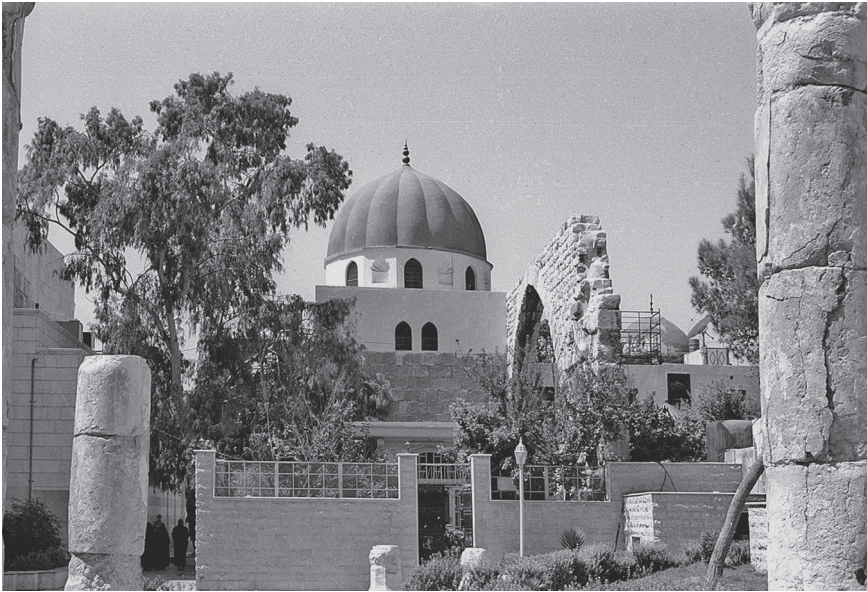


FIGURE 12.2 Saladin's tomb, from the east

aside and the remains reinterred in an elaborate marble inlaid version that now dominates the room.¹⁴

Saladin certainly made improvements to the Citadel, including the erection of some form of apartments for his own use. The extent of his changes to the fortifications is not clear but he is said in literary sources to have rebuilt the city gate immediately to the south, the Bab al-Nasr (Gate of Victory), whose remains were probably removed in 1863. Likewise, Saladin carried out necessary repairs on the Umayyad Mosque, including further rebuilding of the north wall (damaged again by fire in 1173) and the Madhanat al-‘Arus (Minaret of the Bride).

There are a dozen or so non-military buildings that survive, either whole or in part, from the 21-year reign of Saladin but none is specified as endowed or initiated by him. Damascus, however, as the seat of a court, continued to attract a moneyed class and an increase in population unknown since Umayyad days. *Amirs*, governors, mamluks, senior military officers and prominent officials, as well as their wives and mothers, now found the need to draw attention to their generosity and virtues in physical form. It was still a phenomenon in its early stages and did not match in Saladin’s time the extraordinary record of building that the Ayyubids and their courts were to embark on after his death.

If Saladin was too distracted to leave much of an imprint on the city, the women of the court began to revive the Seljuk tradition of taking a prominent role. Female patronage was to become even more marked in the thirteenth century, perhaps an indication of the relatively strong role that women played in Kurdish society. The most prominent of the ‘women of Damascus’ was ‘Ismat al-Din Khatun (see page 206). She was truly a bridge between generations.¹⁵ Daughter of Unur, she became the wife of both Nur al-Din and Saladin and survived to 1186. Her death was kept from Saladin during his long absence on the Mesopotamian campaign, lest the news prevent his recovery from his first bout of serious illness, an indication of his great respect and admiration for her. Her tomb can still be visited in the Jami’a al-Jadid (New Mosque) in Salihiye. The standard melon dome on a double drum later came to be surrounded by ancillary structures including the mosque (1388). Yasser Tabbaa’s study of Ayyubid architecture highlights the tendency for women to favour religious buildings, funeral chambers combined with *madrasas*, or Sufi mystical schools (*khanqahs*); perhaps because of the restrictions imposed on their access to conventional learning.¹⁶ This was reflected in other initiatives of ‘Ismat al-Din: the Khanqah al-Khatuniye (east of the Mosque of Tengiz) and a *madrasa* within the walled city. Her first project was a mausoleum for her father. None but her own tomb has survived.

This widening of architectural patronage to women, however, underlined the broad basis on which the surge of Ayyubid architectural inventiveness was founded. A particularly important surviving complex, which had its origins in a woman’s endowment, is the Madrasa al-Shamiye (see Figure 12.3). The *madrasa* was built as part of the swathe of monuments on what had been rural land known as the Upper Sharaf, developed first as a prestige cemetery under the Seljuks. The Upper Sharaf (bank) formed a shelf looking down over the Barada Valley

from the north, spread between two racecourses 'so green as to seem to be rolls of silk brocade'.¹⁷ The Madrasa al-Shamiye is now stranded on one side of the widened avenue that leads north along the western edge of the old city (Map 3). Sitt al-Sham Zumurrud Khatun, a sister of Saladin, originally founded the *madrasa*. Recently restored following the extensive clearing of this area, the *madrasa*'s main remnant of its twelfth-century foundation is the superb stucco-decorated burial chamber with its triple tombs. Sitt al-Sham began the project to commemorate her brother Turanshah who died in 1180. Disconsolate at this loss, she found herself a year later burying her second husband (Nasr al-Din) and five years later her only son, Husam al-Din, in whose grave she possibly had herself interred 29 long years later.

Saladin gave further stimulus to the belief that Damascus was a sacred city, a process underway for much of the twelfth century. His attachment to the religious struggle based on Damascus went hand in hand with promotion of the city as one of the poles of Islam. Damascus had become a centre on the Muslim pilgrimage trail and memories of the early Sunni dynasty of the Umayyads became part of the repertoire used to wean the population away from the attractions of Shi'a Islam. The reputed places of burial of many of the 'Companions of the Prophet' were identified and the adoption, for example, of the alleged tomb of Fatima¹⁸ as a pilgrimage centre was encouraged. The Umayyad Mosque remained the focus of the city's religious life. In spite of the proliferation of new teaching institutions, Ibn Jubayr's description of his visit in 1184 indicates that the Mosque continued to house many *zawiyas* or informal schools for study and contemplation of the Koran.

It was natural then, that Damascus was also the place where the regime buried its princes. Themselves largely newcomers, Damascus was their home by adoption and most of Saladin's siblings were buried there, except two who died on active service elsewhere. A new format for the burial was imported from Aleppo, the simple box chamber surmounted by a dome rising from a double drum, usually 8- and 16-sided. The earlier predominance of brick, under Mesopotamian influence, was now replaced by solid construction in carefully dressed blocks of stone. The domes, though, were still built in brick and covered with plaster. The interior echoed the sober treatment of the exterior but sometimes carried restrained *muqarnas* decoration to effect the transition from cube to round as the structure rose. Ornamentation in stucco was sometimes applied using stylised floral themes. More often the style was rigidly simple. An intact example is the last Damascus building erected by Saladin's immediate family: the Madrasa Sahibiye (1231) built by Saladin's sister, Rabi'a Khatun, at the eastern end of Salahiye. The façade is relieved only by the central doorway that rises slightly above the profile of the building, otherwise marked simply by a cornice with a band of yellowish stone below.

The Upper Sharaf was an area for family burials. The first surviving example, the Turba Najmiye, was built after 1148 to accommodate several relatives of Saladin, including his elder brother Shahanshah (who had died in the defence of Damascus against the Crusaders in 1148), a son and a cousin as well as Shahanshah's daughter. The Mausoleum of Zain al-Din (1172), also pre-dates Saladin's era. It is

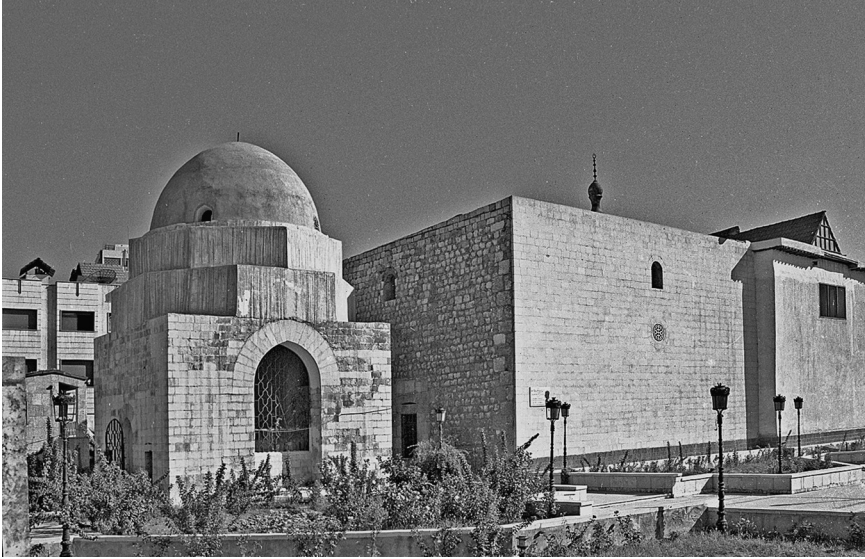


FIGURE 12.3 Madrasa Shamiye and Tomb of Zain al-Din, from the south

located 25 metres to the east bordering Sitt al-Sham's Madrasa Shamiye, finished eight years later (Figure 12.3). (The small surrounding garden today marks the ancient Makbara al-Najmariye, a recreational space favoured by Saladin's family.) Zain al-Din's tomb is typical of funerary mausolea in the Aleppo style: a slightly arched dome on a double drum rises from a cubed base. It too owes its inspiration to a woman, in this case commemorating the loss of her young son in this chaste but boldly conceived monument. Simple shapes combine in assured symmetry with the tall doorway dramatically rising most of the height of the south façade. Farrukshah, nephew and one of Saladin's senior generals, still lies in his mausoleum further west along the Upper Sharaf immediately north of Bahramshah's, both now smothered by the Four Seasons Hotel. Another surviving domed mausoleum, recently transferred as part of road widening to a grassy plantation in the middle of Hittin Square north of the old city (Map 9), was built for Badr al-Din Hasan, one of the old retainers of Nur al-Din (d.c.1190).

The Ayyubid succession

The final tragedy of Saladin's early passing was that his achievements struggled to endure. His own descendants ('incapable of doing anything but amuse themselves')¹⁹ had failed to rally to him in life. On his death the coalition against the Crusaders, which he had precariously put together, quickly fell apart. There were no firm rules for the succession, as Saladin himself had shown in exploiting the uncertainty after Nur al-Din's death. Saladin's empire had been based on an odd mixture of a collective family-based sovereignty, loosely inherited from the

Seljuk-Central Asian tradition, and a sultanate in the more centralised Persian style. To this blend was added an imperfectly absorbed Egypt still moulded by the Fatimids' highly centralised bureaucracy. The formula had essentially relied on Saladin's personal magnetism to hold it together. Saladin had nominated his eldest son, al-Afdal, already governor of Damascus (including Palestine and the Lebanese coast) and had hoped he could consolidate his father's dream of a righteous state, mobilising all the princes' resources behind the strategic goal of expelling the Crusaders. Other sons held Aleppo (al-Zahir Ghazi) and Cairo (al-'Aziz 'Uthman), while their uncle, al-'Adil, held the fourth region, upper Mesopotamia. Within a handful of years, most of the dream lay shattered. Neither the immediate family nor the wider collection of princes and *amirs* bothered with the pious wishes of the great sultan. The holy war was neglected.

Saladin had clearly intended, by appointing al-Afdal to the governorship, that his son should continue to see Damascus as his principal place of residence in order to emphasise the primacy of *jihad*. Al-Afdal, however, found his attachment to Damascus contributed to his undoing. Several of his father's senior *amirs*, abruptly left Damascus for Cairo to lobby Saladin's brother, al-'Adil, to oust the inexperienced heir who seemed intent on sweeping out the old guard. By 1194, Saladin's second son, al-'Aziz, openly demanded the sultanate, al-'Adil having encouraged him to act before his nephew's brash incompetence put the empire in jeopardy. The claim was settled by a series of symbolic assaults on Damascus in 1196. Al-Afdal was allowed quietly to go off to a less high-profile post at Salkhad. Al-'Aziz became sultan, resident in Cairo, but real power was in the hands of his uncle. When al-'Aziz died in 1198 as a result of a hunting accident near Cairo, his brother al-Afdal was again made sultan, al-'Adil being absent on campaign in the north-east. The latter returned and managed to occupy the Damascus Citadel but then faced a strong assault from the forces grouped under al-Afdal, uneasily allied with al-Zahir (Aleppo). These forces, however, disintegrated under al-Afdal's diffident leadership. In 1200 al-'Adil returned to the offensive, confronted his nephew's forces outside Cairo and forced al-Afdal to accept internal banishment.

Without further ado, al-'Adil brushed aside the claims of Saladin's offspring and, from Cairo, declared himself sultan of Egypt and Syria (a title eventually recognised by Baghdad in 1207). A last attempt by al-Afdal to take Damascus was shrugged off and al-'Adil entered the city in triumph in 1201. Nine years of turmoil that had followed Saladin's death ended in what seemed, in hindsight, to have been the obvious solution: al-'Adil, now 60, had been his brother's closest adviser and the appointed guardian of his sons. Probably lacking from the beginning any desire for the top job, he took over when the offspring had proved incapable of wearing their father's mantle. Now al-'Adil's line, rather than Saladin's, was to dominate the remaining 50 years of Ayyubid supremacy.

Al-'Adil was a dour and shadowy figure, more the head of a major corporation than an inspirational figure. His priorities are described by Humphreys as 'puritanism in public morality, careful financial administration, and a commitment to public works'.²⁰ The focus was no longer on *jihad*; al-'Adil aroused the

open hostility of the Hanbali Salihiye ‘lobby’ by largely ignoring the Franks and conducted only one campaign against them. He knew intimately the risks that had haunted Saladin’s last days and saw no reason to tempt destruction by the Crusader army, still invincible in a straight fight. Prolonged campaigns, too, involved formidable difficulties in maintaining a coherent Arab coalition. The trend under this CEO was towards steady growth not risk, mainly through expansion of Ayyubid authority into the Jezira and Armenia.

One lesson learnt from the experience of al-‘Adil in the wars of succession was the need for a safe point of refuge to replace the patchwork Citadel cobbled together since Seljuk times. Between 1194 and 1201, Damascus was attacked five times by members of the Ayyubid family and their armies. In the face of the many challenges to al-‘Adil’s rise, the new Citadel reflected the Sultan’s need to bolster his supremacy over his nephews. The Crusader threat was not the determining factor. Al-‘Adil remained largely indifferent to any new confrontation with the rump Crusader kingdom. Moreover, in May 1201, a terrible earthquake provided compelling new reasons to improve the city’s defences. The shock was huge in scale, enough to be felt across much of present-day western Syria. (Repeat shocks were felt until May 1202.)

His supremacy now assured, al-‘Adil settled down to repair the cumulative damage of the earthquake and the intensive campaigns of bombardment (especially

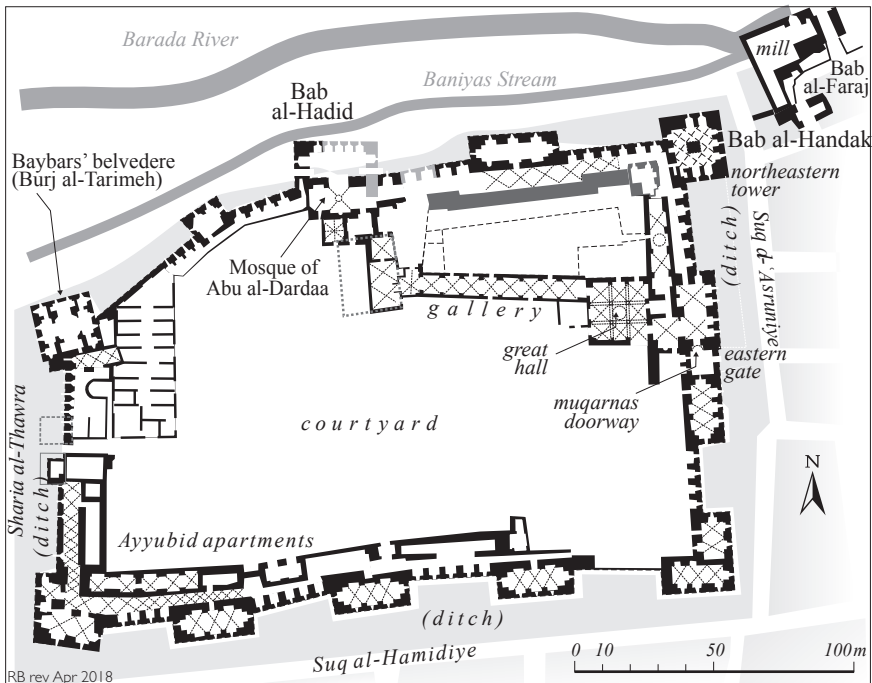


FIGURE 12.4 Citadel of Damascus

heavy along the northern wall). This virtually required a new Citadel and modern research confirms only remnants of the previous structures were incorporated into the present circuit of powerful walls. Earlier accounts of the central columned hall and gallery provide a glimpse of the splendid court of the Damascus Ayyubids.²¹ The magnificent throne hall of the Citadel provided a fitting setting for al-‘Adil’s supremacy, with its central space defined by four enormous columns topped with capitals almost certainly rescued from the ruins of the Jupiter Temple (Figure 12.6). It was approached by a 68-metre long gallery directly from the north gate, a long intimidating passage for anyone entering the sultan’s presence.

Advances in the techniques of siege warfare had also rendered the old fortification techniques irrelevant, particularly with the need to provide broader platform space for the counter-bombardment devices developed in the late twelfth century.²² The project was huge in scale and had to be completed without dismantling the existing walls so the old Seljuk walls were simply enveloped by the new circuit. The use of so many (13) massive tower platforms was unprecedented. ‘It is this which gives the Damascus [Citadel] its particular glory; on every side, nature left it weak, and on every side the hand of man has made it fearfully strong’.²³ Work began in 1203 and was not completed until 1216. The citizens of Damascus were co-opted to dig the outer defensive works including the western ditch (now a small grassed area bordering the widened Sharia al-Thawra). Al-‘Adil’s Ayyubid princes were required to ‘sponsor’ the ten major towers. Sauvaget interpreted the enforced contributions as much as acts of submission to al-‘Adil as means of funding the ambitious work. Al-‘Adil was certainly careful to ensure that his name got most of the credit.²⁴

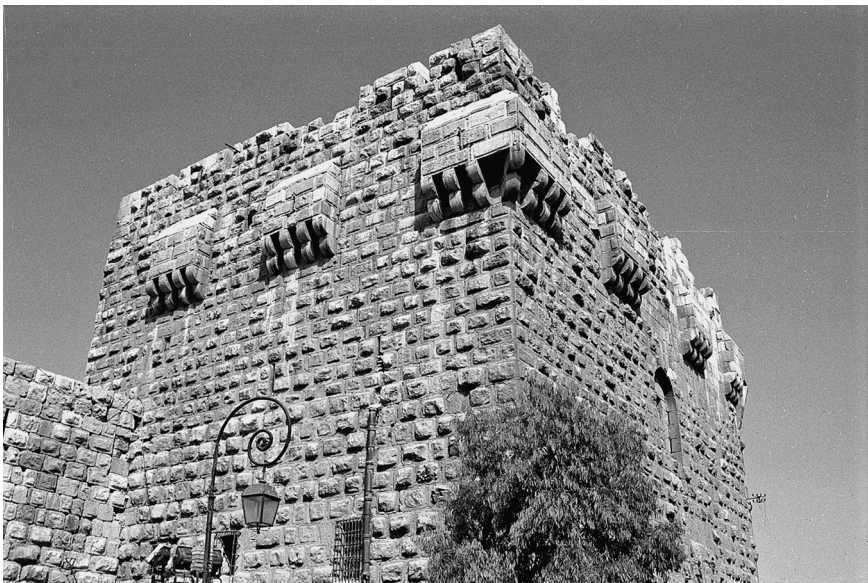


FIGURE 12.5 Citadel, north-east tower



FIGURE 12.6 Ayyubid audience hall in the Damascus Citadel

Having served as a prison until the early 1980s, the interior of the Citadel is still under restoration. Meanwhile the full glory of the enclosure can be appreciated either from the extensive courtyard or from an external tour of its towers and curtain walls, bristling with arrow slits and machicolation. The eastern gate leading to the Great Mosque is decorated with a superb *muqarnas* canopy, contrasting extreme sobriety with dramatic exuberance. The primarily military emphasis of the north gateway is underlined by its complex passage with five changes of direction, disguised by many alterations over the years. The gate's central cruciform chamber has a cross-vaulted roof topped by a small cupola, an unusual space occupied since 1720 by the Mosque of Abu Darda. The existing apartments along the southern side of the courtyard were jacketed within the massive towers of the new enclosure.²⁵

Al-ʿAdil also carried out major works to upgrade the Umayyad Mosque. The courtyard was paved in marble²⁶ (the original marble flagging had perhaps declined over the centuries and had been covered by a surface of beaten earth) and the great bronze doors that still grace the western entrance, the Bab al-Barid, were installed.

Al-Muʿazzam ʿIssa (1218–1228)

The empire increasingly became centralised on Cairo, with an administration on imperial lines replacing the family-based system Saladin had presided over. While al-ʿAdil's son, al-Muʿazzam ʿIssa, was appointed Damascus governor, this was now just one hierarchical appointment among many. Everyone knew real power was

with the father and al-Mu'azzam's name does not figure on a single inscription from Damascus though he enjoyed a reputation as a sound administrator.

Al-'Adil died in 1218 as he set out from Damascus in a belated reaction to the news that the Fifth Crusade had taken vital positions in the Egyptian port of Damietta. His sudden death did not provoke a new succession crisis. Of his three eldest sons, al-Kamil in Cairo was tacitly recognised as head of the family but al-Mu'azzam 'Issa had already served as autonomous prince in Damascus. As sultan in his own right (r.1218–1227), he loosened a little the rigorous moral strictures that al-'Adil had imposed. In his own behaviour he was a stern adherent of the Hanafi school. His family mausoleum was incorporated in the Hanafi foundation, the Madrasa al-Mu'azimiye, no longer extant in the Salahiye quarter. The Hanbalis of Salahiye had by now become sufficiently influential to obtain permission for the first congregational mosque since the Umayyad Mosque (not counting the largely outdoors Musalla Mosque, later enclosed). Begun in 1201, the Hanbali Mosque was completed during al-Mu'azzam's rule, though funding provided by the brother-in-law of Saladin, Prince Keukburi, had been largely instrumental in the project's completion. The Hanbali Mosque stands on a peaceful side street of al-Salihiye, its courtyard marked by six Crusader columns.

This was a period of flourishing construction in Damascus and one of the most remarkable of the projects survives, the work of al-Mu'azzam's Ortuqid wife (from Mardin) – Akhshu (in some versions Ikhshawira) Khatun. Known as the Madrasa Maridaniye, it stands on the north-east side of the square at Jisr al-Abiad, at the main intersection leading into the Salahiye quarter (Figure 12.7). Though much

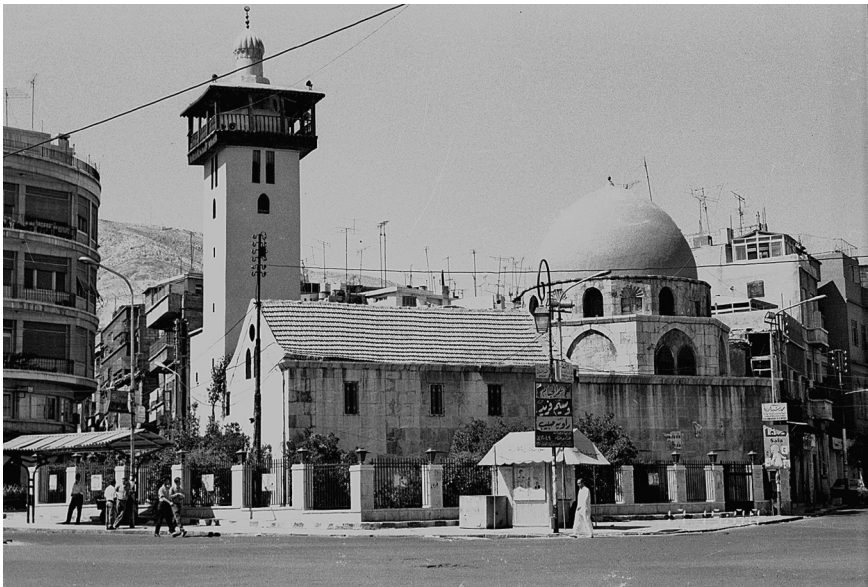


FIGURE 12.7 Madrasa Maridaniye

altered in subsequent centuries, the 'simple but harmonious structure' envisaged by the princess is still evident. Her vision of quiet piety continued after her husband's death. She went on *Hajj* to Mecca and stayed on there. She refused to touch any of the income from the *waqf* for the *madrassa* and once her savings had been exhausted, sustained herself with what she earned as a simple water carrier.²⁷

Jerusalem betrayed

On the death of al-Mu'azzam 'Issa in 1227, al-Kamil in Cairo initially raised no objection to the succession of the former's young son, al-Nasr Dawud (r.1227–1229) as Prince of Damascus. Though al-Kamil had been sufficiently forthright in his opposition to the Crusaders to see off the Fifth Crusade from Egypt in 1221, a sixth was not long in coming, led by Emperor Frederick II of Germany. Al-Kamil used his move into Palestine, however, to bring his rivalry with al-Nasr to a head. So distracting was this preoccupation that al-Kamil willingly implemented an earlier undertaking by al-Mu'azzam to hand Jerusalem to the German emperor in 1229. He acted in the belief that unless he was free of the prospect of a punishing war with the Crusaders, he would have no chance of taking Damascus with his own forces. Though the agreement continued Muslim control of the Islamic holy places and ceded only a narrow corridor to the Crusaders, which made the gain meaningless in military terms, al-Nasr Dawud used the treaty to whip up Damascene sentiment against his uncle. He directed a popular preacher to deliver a Friday sermon in the Umayyad Mosque deploring the treaty as a disgrace to Islam. The effect was electric; the crowd was 'reduced to violent sobbing and tears'.²⁸

The settlement with Frederick was accompanied by a proposed new division of the principalities: Damascus would go to al-Kamil's brother, al-Ashraf, but clearly acknowledging al-Kamil's sovereignty; in return, al-Kamil obtained a break-up of the powerful principalities which had threatened his pre-eminence. Al-Ashraf initially considered Damascus the consolation prize for his agreement to surrender his huge territories in the north-east but on arrival in Damascus 'was completely beguiled by the beautiful gardens of the Ghouta, its lush greenery and flowing waters, and the fragrance of its fruit trees', a total contrast to the barren lands he had surrendered in the bargain.²⁹

Unfortunately, al-Nasr Dawud decided to resist the settlement, incensed by the proposed truce giving the Crusaders control of Jerusalem. Al-Kamil's forces reached Damascus to enforce the proposed agreement in May 1229. They camped at what is now the Mosque al-Qadem south of the city. The siege put great pressure on the city but the inhabitants rallied to al-Nasr Dawud, conscious of the long and stable rule of his father al-Mu'azzam and shocked by the sell-out to the Crusaders. For the last time, the local militia played a substantial role in the resistance to an invader but after a month of siege, al-Nasr sued for a peaceful outcome and was given a new principality carved out of what was left of Muslim Palestine.

Al-Ashraf (1229–1237)

Al-Ashraf now assumed his appointed governorship of Damascus and the city experienced a largely uneventful eight years, marked only by the new governor's more narrow-minded attitude to the varieties of religious expression in Islam, resulting in action to suppress some of the Sufi sects that had sprung up in the city. Perhaps the most striking monument to his strict sense of propriety is the Jami'a al-Tawba (Mosque of Repentance), which survives in the 'Uqaybe quarter, 200 metres north-west of the Bab al-Faradis of the old city. The mosque was consciously built on the site of a *caravanserai* which had allegedly earned a reputation for loose morals and prostitution. The congregational mosque was laid out as a scaled-down version of the Umayyad Mosque. Al-Ashraf's preference was to support 'back to basics' in religion, thus congregational worship rather than the role of sects or schools³⁰ and an emphasis on *hadith* as the basis of education. He established two *dar al-hadiths*, part of only one of them surviving in the Salahiye quarter (Dar al-Hadith al-Ashrafiye). Of his own tomb, once located just to the east of Saladin's, the remains were removed early in the twentieth century.

The program of building *madrasas* halted during the 1230s, resuming with the Madrasa Atabakiye (1242), another foundation by one of the women of the court, Tarkan Khatun, a niece of Saladin. She was married to al-Ashraf, though she obviously had the freedom of will to found an institution following the Shafe'i school. The *madrasa*, which contains her tomb, is still standing in the Salahiye quarter near a cluster of late Ayyubid monuments including her husband's Dar al-Hadith. Its doorway, now jammed between protruding façades and below the present street level, is a remarkable example of the use of *muqarnas* and bell-shaped *voussoirs* for flamboyant effect, in many ways heralding the Mamluk style (Figure 12.8).

Al-Ashraf's rule was the last phase of the Ayyubid golden age for Damascus. The economy was producing a steady level of prosperity, another factor fuelling the prolific building program. The first Italian merchants were allowed to visit and take up residence in the city. (Economic links with Italy had gone back to Saladin's renewal of the Fatimids' ties with the Italian cities in order to secure the *matériel* he needed for his campaigns.) Two decades of rule by two popular and efficient princes had brought a steady flow of revenues and, though the confrontation with the Crusaders was still in play, it rarely resulted in destructive clashes. The Ayyubids were still distracted in the north-east, their empire now stretching into Armenia and the upper reaches of the Tigris. This did not prevent, however, continued family tensions as the Syria-based brothers sought to assert their independence against al-Kamil in Cairo.

In the midst of these brewing tensions, al-Ashraf died after a four-month illness in August 1237, aged 56. His successor was his brother, al-Salih Isma'il (r.1237; 1239–1245). Two months later, al-Kamil's army arrived and began to besiege Damascus, again locating his headquarters at al-Qadem. The assault was fierce, the forces of al-Salih Isma'il laying waste the new extra-mural suburbs to deny the Cairene forces shelter during their assault on the walls. The six-week assault took



FIGURE 12.8 Doorway to the Madrasa Atabakiye

a terrible toll on the city and al-Salih sued for terms which were surprisingly generous, allowing him to retire from Damascus to two *iqta*'s in the neighbourhood, Ba'albek and Salkhad.

Back on the periphery (1238–1250)

In spite of al-Kamil's vigorous response to the challenge from the Syrian princes, there is no evidence that he contemplated restoring a highly centralised state. In any event he died three weeks later, leaving the status of Damascus in suspense after al-Salih's graceful withdrawal.³¹ The passing of al-Kamil, the last of the commanding

Ayyubid leaders, marked 'the end of the true Ayyubid regime'.³² What little semblance of common purpose the Ayyubid family might have preserved since Saladin's death 47 years earlier was now gone. Al-'Adil Abu Bakr (al-'Adil II) was his father's designated successor in Cairo so that was undisputed. The debate among the princes over an appointment for Damascus was longer and more difficult. Finally the choice was al-Jawad Yunus, son of a minor son of al-'Adil I. It was quickly apparent that al-Jawad too was tempted by dreams of an autonomous Damascus principality, not subject to Cairo. Cairo's swift response provoked panic and al-Jawad preferred to hand over Damascus in an exchange with al-Salih Ayyub in return for part of the latter's holdings in the Jezira. Tempted to try another rash move against Egypt, al-Salih Ayyub's absence gave another opening to al-Salih Isma'il to regain Damascus. Meanwhile, al-Salih Ayyub found himself propelled to the throne of Egypt at the end of a complex three-way power struggle.

Seeking to retain his independence vis-à-vis Cairo, the opportunistic al-Salih Isma'il concluded a truce with the Kingdom of Jerusalem recognising greater Christian rights over the holy city than had been conferred in the 1229 settlement, even though the city had not long before been regained for the Muslims by al-Nasr Dawud. His new alliance, however, proved to be a military disaster. The forces of Jerusalem and Damascus met serious defeat (Battle of la Forbie, near Gaza, 1244) at the hands of al-Salih Ayyub's forces, opening the way for the latter (now supported by Aleppo) to take his revenge on Damascus. The besieging armies dealt terrible punishment on Damascus for four months (1244–1245), including the destruction of the eastern minaret of the Umayyad Mosque. Al-Salih Isma'il sued for terms and was allowed to leave the city for one of his honorific fiefdoms, later taking refuge in Aleppo. He was never to occupy the tomb his mother prepared for him in Damascus, a little south-west of the Hospital of Nur al-Din.³³

Al-Salih Ayyub in Cairo (r.1240–1249) was now determined to make the inferior status of Damascus a permanent reality. Aleppo took over the role of second city of the empire. The collective basis for Ayyubid power having disappeared, 'the other Ayyubid princes (were) treated not as kinsmen but as enemies'.³⁴ Authority was now centralised, shored up by the recruitment of mamluks on a large scale. His governor in Damascus was no prince of the blood likely to have notions of independent authority. Command in Damascus was now split three ways: between a viceroy (*na'ib al-sultana*), the commander of the Citadel and a *wazir*, a purely functional position. This was the structure that would prevail into the Mamluk era.

Though the Ayyubids for several decades had not seen the Crusaders as a major threat, rather an unwelcome presence to be tolerated, al-Salih Ayyub's centralised leadership was a better basis for an offensive posture. In 1247, limited operations in Palestine resulted in the taking of Tiberias and Ascalon, the first Muslim offensive against the remnants of the Crusader kingdom since Saladin's death over 50 years before. In 1249, a new crusade assembled by Louis IX of France took Damietta in Egypt, just as al-Salih Ayyub lay on his death bed. There followed a most extraordinary subterfuge engineered by his widow, Shajjar al-Durr, to conceal the sultan's death until his successor, al-Mu'azzam Turanshah, could return to Cairo from Iraq.

Though Turanshah's return (1250) coincided with a fortuitous victory over Louis, the new sultan was murdered ignominiously a few days later by the Bahriye guard, a special corps of mamluks raised, ironically, by al-Salih to protect the Ayyubid regime. (The plot was undoubtedly inspired and led by Rukn al-Din Baybars, whose later supremacy brought the definitive end of the Ayyubids.) Shajjar al-Durr now took over power in her own name but effectively the mamluks had brought down the curtain on the Ayyubid system by asserting the power of the professional army over the princes. A process that had been hundreds of years in the making, since the first Turkish mamluks were introduced to the 'Abbasid armies, was coming to fruition, though it was to be another ten years before they could openly assert their claim to be the sole defenders of the abode of Islam. At the end of that decade of chaos, a mamluk strongman emerged in Cairo and had himself declared sultan, al-Muzaffar Qutuz (r.1259–1260).

While Cairo was distracted by these developments, Ayyubid forces in Damascus called on Aleppo's al-Nasr II Yusuf (r.1236–1260), great-grandson of Saladin, to take southern Syria. Yusuf established again a centralised state based on Damascus but though he initially made impressive gains in restoring stability, it was merely the calm before the catastrophe. His reign was marked by growing resistance from the remaining Ayyubids towards the rise of the mamluks in Cairo, a development that helped distract Damascus from taking seriously the new Central Asian threat gathering just over the horizon.

Courtly society

The 60 years following Saladin's death were one of the most extraordinarily creative periods in the building record of Damascus. The tradition of courtly involvement in the endowment of religious and charitable institutions, which had begun under the Seljuks and Burids, gathered pace under Nur al-Din and developed redoubled energy during the Ayyubid period. In a survey of the Ayyubid building program, Stephen Humphreys records almost 200 educational, religious or charitable institutions built during the 60-year period. The rate of construction almost tripled under the Ayyubids, subsequently falling back to a third of their record under the Mamluks.³⁵ The patrons of these buildings were largely the men and women³⁶ of the court or the senior members of its military and religious establishment. Very few are endowed or initiated by members of the bureaucracy or private merchants (the practice later adopted in Ottoman times). While the actual rulers were not prime movers – their initiatives were usually confined to the city's defensive works – there can be little doubt they encouraged members of the elite to earn merit by undertaking such works.

Almost by definition, members of these established hierarchies were from the non-Arab ruling elements: Kurds and Turks. It is therefore, perhaps, the more remarkable that they invested so heavily to the benefit of Damascus. It should be remembered, though, that the Ayyubids had adopted Damascus as their own; they were not simply there on assignment. They at least partially integrated themselves

into its culture and enjoyed relatively easy relations with its citizens and religious establishment. (A large proportion of the religious leadership were themselves recent arrivals from Iraq or Persia, attracted by the new role of Damascus as a seat of learning.) After Saladin, the military caste increasingly came to be dominated by the non-Arab mamluks who wanted to establish their credentials with the city as their ranks swelled. An example is one of Saladin's Circassian mamluks, Fakhr al-Din Jaharkas, whose tomb's twin melon domes still billow above the central sector of the Salhiye quarter.

It was an era too when those with means, fiercely confident in their attachment to mainstream Sunnism, invested in the status of Damascus as a citadel of Islam. Little of the construction was meant to convey a sense of pomp or self-importance. A good example of the austere style is the rebuilt eastern minaret (replacing that destroyed in the events of 1244–1245, page 222) of the Umayyad Mosque (Figure 12.9). Austere decoration is provided by double windows within

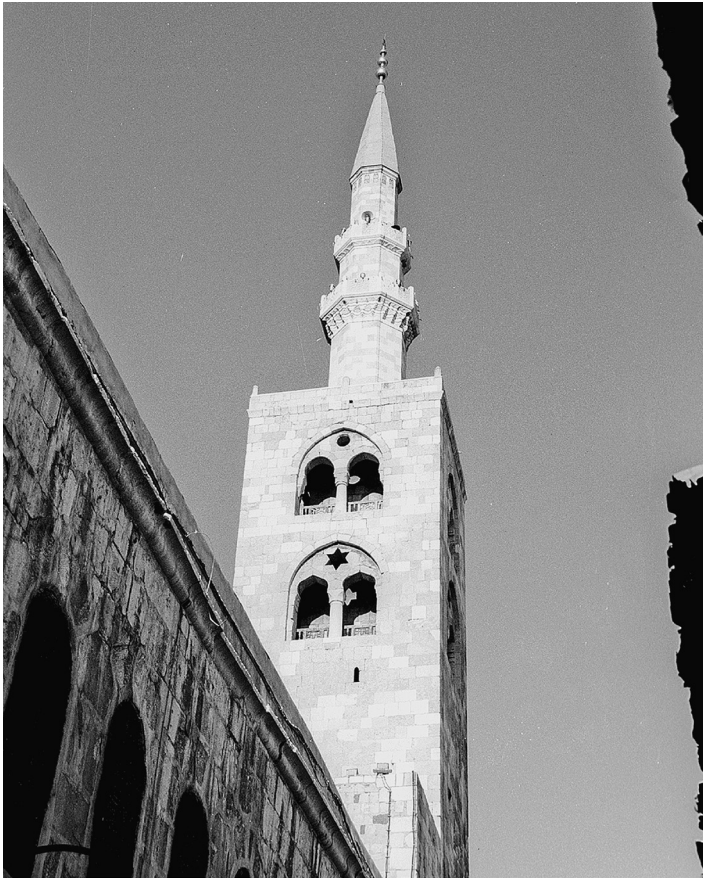


FIGURE 12.9 Minaret 'of Jesus'

an arched frame repeated in two rows on each of the four sides. This is the minaret later associated with the legend that Christ, after defeating the Anti-Christ, will herald the Last Judgement by descending via the minaret to pray in the Mosque.³⁷ (The minaret's incongruous candle-snuffer top was an Ottoman addition.)

The list of monuments largely comprises small-scale initiatives meant to do good, to inculcate Islamic learning or to serve the dual purpose of commemorating a death by endowing a *madrasa* or mosque. The Ayyubids favoured the Aleppo tradition with its simple shapes and strict harmony. The single-purpose tombs were sober in the extreme, instructive rather than grandiloquent, conveying by their simple lines and restrained decoration respect for Islam's pristine values. Many are still found in the gap north of the old city between Salhiye and the northern suburbs (then unsettled). A good example of an open-canopy *muqarnas*-domed *turba* lies immediately east of the Dahdah cemetery (now smothered by a mosque redevelopment). It commemorates one of Saladin's generals, 'Izz al-Din Ibrahim Ibn Shams al-Din Ibn al-Muqaddam (d.1200). Nearby (on the north side of the cemetery, facing Sharia Baghdad) is the tomb of Mahmud, son of Zengi, prince of Qarqasiye (after 1227). Further east, now re-erected in the traffic circle of Hittin Square, is the tomb of a black eunuch of the court, Shibl al-Daula Kafur al-Husami (d.1226), originally part of a complex, the Madrasa Shibliye (Map 9).³⁸

Funerary *madrasas* remained a favoured means of commemorating service and sustaining the faith. Salhiye, already established as a fitting place to be buried, began to consolidate its reputation for holiness with a string of *madrasas*. One of the best examples of the period is the Madrasa Rukniye (1224–8) established by the *amir*, Rukn al-Din Mankuris, a brother of al-'Adil. Recently restored and described by DeGeorge as 'one of the finest monuments of the Ayyubid era',³⁹ it lies at the eastern extremity of the Salhiye quarter. Nearby is another fine building in the north Syrian style, the funerary *madrasa* of one of Saladin's sisters, Rabi'a Khatun who died in 1245, 50 years after her brother. The building, said by Herzfeld to

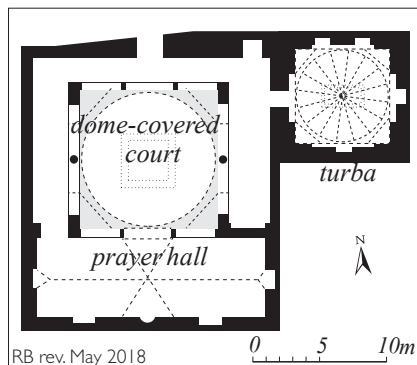


FIGURE 12.10 Madrasa Rukniye

Source: plan after fig. 1 in Ernst Herzfeld 1946: 11–12

show 'complete mastery over stone', now serves as a girls' school but its plan is intact.⁴⁰ Not far south of here, the Madrasa al-Hafiziye, surviving in a pleasant park environment (Map 9), was erected in 1250 in honour of Princess Bahta Khatun, a descendant of a Seljuk prince and freed slave of al-'Adil, who survived for three decades after his death. The entrance doorway is a piece of extraordinary architectural fantasy, an elaborate shell shape hovering overhead.

Only half surviving amid a commercial precinct of the modern city is the Madrasa al-'Izziye in Mutanabi Street, on the Upper Sharaf.⁴¹ It was built as the funerary *madrasa* for one of al-Mu'azzam's *amirs*, 'Izz al-Din Aybak, who served as lord of Salghad (1214–1246) but revolted and died in captivity in Cairo in 1248. His corpse was returned for burial in Damascus eight years later. A remarkable but little-noticed example is the funerary *madrasa* endowed by an old mamluk of Nur al-Din who survived until 1247–1248, Saif al-Din Qiliç. His *madrasa* is remarkable for the use of boldly contrasting stonework (*ablaq*) across the whole façade. It stands badly dilapidated just to the east of the spices bazaar in the old city, not far from the *hammam* still named after his first master. The use of *ablaq* had become a Damascene device many decades earlier when Nur al-Din had his Damascus architects copy in stone the effect, borrowed from the Mesopotamian tradition, that Aleppo had wrought in plaster. The use of *ablaq* in this flashy style was to become characteristic of the Mamluk centuries. From Damascus it was to find its way to Cairo especially when the first of the great Mamluk rulers, Baybars, imported a Damascus architect for his Cairo projects. Such extensive use of *ablaq* represented both a trend towards more industrialised operation of quarries with stone from different sources now cut in standard blocks as well as the more prominent role of specialised architects seeking to make their mark in an increasingly busy and competitive industry.⁴²

Part of the rash of new construction may also be explained by the drive to develop new extra-mural areas of the city. The area immediately north-west of the walled city (al-'Uqaybe) became an extension of the city's core and major mosques began to be developed along the line of the thoroughfares now called Suq Saruja and Sharia al-Malik al-Feisal. The Midan area, well to the south of the old city, whose major function had been the assembling and provisioning of the annual *Hajj*, also began to acquire buildings of a more permanent nature. The first recorded example was the Mosque of Musalla. It was no coincidence that this area had long been preserved for outdoor worship going back to Umayyad times as it was on the road south to Arabia and Mecca. It had also been favoured for feasts, celebrations and the ceremonial departure or return of military expeditions. In 1209, al-'Adil formalised it with a surrounding stone wall with a stone *mihrab* and two-aisled arcade on the *qibla* side, intending it to serve for the celebration of the two great Muslim feasts. The present Musalla Mosque, jammed in to the urban build-up between the Saghir Cemetery and the large square named after the Battle of Yarmuk, preserves none of this sense of space. A nearby building, possibly an earlier survival reconstructed during the first half of the thirteenth century, is the little Mosque Abu Fulus which preserves very few of its original

features except for an intriguing *mihrab* in sculptured plaster, said to be a survival of the Fatimid period.⁴³

Though much of the court life began to gravitate back to Cairo after Saladin's death, the strategic position of Damascus was essential to the Ayyubid cause. Cairo and Damascus were virtually twin capitals of the empire. Neither could be alienated from the leader's direct control, unlike other major towns that could be granted to members of the family or trusted military figures as *iqta's* or fiefdoms. Damascus controlled the inland axis that fastened the Arab world together. The development of the Cairo sultanate on the one hand robbed Damascus of its status as imperial capital but on the other left it with an active princely court and the base for much of the empire's military activity. The lack of a central driving personality after Saladin's death, however, brought new tensions that often exposed the city to open conflict. (Humphreys points out that Damascus was besieged 12 times between 1193 and 1260.⁴⁴)

Cairo might outshine Damascus in the scale of its monuments but Damascus was still the 'intellectual centre of the Empire'. It already possessed half the *madrasas* of Nur al-Din's domains on his death in 1174 and, during Saladin's rule, 600 men of the turban were on the state payroll in Damascus.⁴⁵ Most of these were Arabs and played little role in the power structure but they generated a great deal of respect, thus inspiring the rush among the elite to win credit through pious foundations. Some endowments were meant to strengthen particular schools of Islamic jurisprudence, for example the Hanafi *madrasa* established by Khadija Khatun, a daughter of al-Malik al-Mu'azzam 'Issa – the Madrasa Murshidiye (1253). It still stands in that cluster of Ayyubid pious foundations at the western end of Salahiye with its tall square minaret punctuating the sky in an uncomplicated statement of faith. Its prayer hall and *turba* (recently restored) retain much of their sculptured plaster decoration.

Those of the senior Ayyubids not buried in Cairo found interment in the area north of the Umayyad Mosque. Regrettably, al-Kamil's burial-place north-east of the Mosque has not survived but al-'Adil's is preserved. The Madrasa 'Adiliye today serves as a centre for the study of Arabic manuscripts. In spite of some unfortunate restoration work in the early part of the last century, the north-Syrian-style *madrasa's* great portal (Figure 12.11) stands as a fitting match to the later tomb of the Mamluk Sultan, Baybars, opposite. The Shafe'i *madrasa* was planned by Nur al-Din to replace the Nuriye as his funerary *madrasa* (see pages 92–3n21) but was incomplete on his death and remained unused. It set a new, more ambitious standard for public buildings. Still unfinished on al-'Adil's death in 1218, it was completed by his son, al-Mu'azzam, four years later. The domed mausoleum, its entrance marked by a soaring monumental pendant arch masking twin *muqarnas* domes and with a finely carved frame, is the first of the great masterpieces of the more adventurous Aleppo-inspired Ayyubid style. The contrast between the sobriety of the building's dour undecorated form and this highly flamboyant doorway is perhaps a conscious touch of fantasy.⁴⁶

A small memory of the last Ayyubid, al-Nasr Yusuf, survives in the Madrasa Nasriye, built by the sultan in 1255–1256 within the remains of the north-east



FIGURE 12.11 Madrasa 'Adiliye, doorway

corner of the outer *peribolos* of the Roman temple. At least the reused antique wall blocks survive though the remains of the *madrasa* within are probably non-existent after long use as dwellings or as a holding centre for prisoners on death row. The street wall today still carries a wide battered window frame which once graced the northern wall of the Jupiter Temple.

The city's growth in stature as an Islamic religious centre attracted scholars and mystics from as far away as Muslim Andalusia. There was one notable death in 1240, namely the famed Sufi, Mohi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi. His role was to bring fame to the city for centuries as a centre for Sufi mysticism. His sojourn also rebuilt the connection with the Iberian Peninsula that had started with the initial transplanting of the Umayyads after 750. Ibn 'Arabi had settled in Damascus in 1223, probably because his unorthodox teachings found protection with the Ayyubid ruling family. His circle of followers grew in the 17 years before his death. His burial, on the

slopes of Salahiye was initially arranged in the family *turba* of the *qadi* of Damascus. In later centuries, however, his memory grew in the imagination of those inclined to mysticism and the first Ottoman years were to see a major embellishment of his burial place which until today serves as an important centre of pilgrimage. We shall examine this building later (page 245) but the burial further encouraged the notion of Damascus as a 'holy place'.

The city's amenities were not neglected and the number of baths continued to increase. One example, still functioning, is the Hammam Usama, built by a mamluk of Saladin, 'Izz al-Din Usama al-Halabi (probably originally as part of his private house that later became the Madrasa Badra'iye on the opposite side of the lane).⁴⁷ The structure, like the façade of the (Ayyubid) Madrasa Nasriye to the west, also incorporates remains of the northeastern corner of the *peribolos* of the temple. Other Ayyubid baths survive to serve their original purpose. The Hammam 'Umari in Suq Saruja, still with much of its Ayyubid design intact; the Hammam Ammoune, just south of the Dahdah Cemetery; and the Hammam Silsila, north of the Umayyad Mosque, whose decor has been radically upgraded in recent years. The Qaimariyes, a Kurdish family associated with the court, built a notable new *maristan* (1248) in Salahiye. It stands (now housing the archives of the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*awqaf*)) on the southern side of the central sector astride the Yazid Canal, notable for its 'clarity of plan, majesty of volumes, a sobriety bordering on the austere with decorative touches providing discreet relief'.⁴⁸

After the rash of institutions devoted to particular schools of Islamic thought or preachers, the trend to congregational mosques, often with central courtyards along the lines of the Umayyad Mosque, was consolidated. For example the existing Mosque al-Jarrah, which stood outside the southern gate of the city (Bab al-Saghir) servicing the nearby cemetery, was expanded under Sultan al-Ashraf for this purpose. It survives today, defying several attempts at destruction given its exposed position outside the walls.

In addition to the extensive rebuilding of the Citadel (pages 215–217), the city walls with their moat and gates were extensively reconstructed during Ayyubid times. Bab Tuma was totally rebuilt using some classical stones in 1227. The stretch of wall to the east was improved and the tower attributed to Sultan al-Salih Ayyub, completed in 1248, is still standing. The Bab al-Faradis giving access to the northern entrance to the Great Mosque was rebuilt (surviving outer face, 1232–1242) and Bab Saghir together with the southern walls and their protective ditches were extensively realigned.⁴⁹

Notes

1 Lyons and Jackson 1980: 69.

2 Ehrenkreutz 1972: 127.

3 Eychenne 2102: 245–246.

4 Gaudefroy Demombynes 1923: XXVIII makes the distinction that while the Caliph reigned, the Sultan governed in his name.

- 5 Runciman 1965 II: 399.
- 6 Lyons and Jackson 1980: 239.
- 7 Ehrenkreutz 1972: 193.
- 8 Lyons and Jackson 1980: 253.
- 9 Lyons and Jackson 1980: 285.
- 10 Runciman 1965 III: 57.
- 11 Translation from Beha al-Din 1994 (C.W. Wilson trans.). The Koranic quotation is from Surah 59. 22.
- 12 Raymond 1993: 97.
- 13 Gaube in Gaube and Fransa 2000: 249.
- 14 S. Weber quoted in Keenan 2000: 42 corrects the urban legend that it was Kaiser Wilhelm who had the body re-interred in the new sarcophagus. The German Kaiser's contribution was a bronze wreath presented 20 years after 'Abdulhamid's gesture.
- 15 Humphreys 1994: 42.
- 16 Tabbaa 1997.
- 17 Ibn Jubayr (Broadhurst trans.) 1952: 301.
- 18 The tomb in the Saghir Cemetery is dated by inscription to 1048 and refers to a later Fatima. The cenotaph is, nevertheless, a unique example of Fatimid art and the Kufic lettering interwoven with strands of foliage is of superb quality. Sauvaget 1938 III: 147–167. Jalabert 2002–03; Sourdell-Thomine 1957: 85.
- 19 Cahen 'Ayyubids' in *EI2*.
- 20 Humphreys 1977: 145.
- 21 A preliminary report on the work of the Franco-Syrian team is given in Berthier 2002. The north-eastern structures were earlier examined in Hanisch 1996a.
- 22 On the technological background to the counter-weight *trebuchet* – Chevedden 1986, 2000.
- 23 Cathcart King 1951: 62.
- 24 Humphreys 1977: 148 quoting Sauvaget 1930b: 226.
- 25 Gardiol in Berthier 2002: 57.
- 26 Humphreys 1977: 148–149 reports that the work had to be done twice. The original project in 1207 quickly succumbed to pitting and fracturing; it was redone in 1214–1217.
- 27 Humphreys 1994: 44.
- 28 Humphreys 1977: 203.
- 29 Humphreys 1977: 199–200.
- 30 Humphreys 1977: 211 points out that half of the 14 construction projects he sponsored were congregational mosques (*jawami*). He also converted a former funerary mosque immediately south of Bab Saghir to serve as a congregational mosque, the Jami'a al-Jarrah.
- 31 Al-Kamil's three daughters erected a tomb (Turba Kamiliye) on the east side outside the north wall of the Umayyad Mosque, connected to the Mosque by a new doorway – Humphreys 1994: 41. Humphreys notes that this may have been part of an attempt to build up this area north of the Mosque as an Ayyubid 'royal City of the Dead' given the presence nearby of the tombs of Saladin and al-'Adil.
- 32 Gibb 'Ayyubids' in *EI1*.
- 33 He later took part in the unsuccessful attempt to restore Ayyubid rule in Cairo after the Mamluk coup of 1250 but was one of the princes captured and strangled under the new regime (1251). The tomb is not extant.
- 34 Gibb in Setton 1969b: 712.
- 35 Humphreys 1989: 152, Table 1.
- 36 Women initiated 16 per cent of the religious and charitable projects of the Ayyubid era but their share of projects initiated by members of the Ayyubid family amounted to almost 50 per cent – Humphreys 1994: 35–36.
- 37 Sauvaget 1932b: 32.
- 38 Examples of the single tomb are too numerous to mention here in detail and are particularly thick on the ground in the Salihiye area. A good example is the Tomb of Ibn Salama

al-Raqqi, another high official of the court, at the eastern end of Salahiye. His domed tomb sits on 8- and 16-sided drums, beautifully realised in the style of the time.

39 Degeorge 1997: 229

40 Herzfeld 1946 III: 9.

41 Sauvaget 1938 II: Fig. 39 reconstructs the original plan of a courtyard *madrasa* of which only the gate and the tomb chamber survive. The remaining courtyard was compressed and the gate moved south to allow for the widening of Mutanabi Street.

42 Allen 1986: Chapter 11.

43 Rihawi 1977: 96 and Degeorge 2001: 43 give the *mihrab* as Fatimid. Roujon and Vilan 1997: 64 ascribe the building to the tenth century.

44 Humphreys 1977: 11.

45 Humphreys 1977: 24 ; Pouzet 1991: 407.

46 Allen 1986: 57; Moaz 1990: 411; Sauvaget 1938 II: 88–90.

47 Sauvaget 1930a: 370–380.

48 Degeorge 1997: 234 – author's translation.

49 Dabbour 2012: 32.2.

13

MAMLUKS (1250–1515)

The Central Asian threat

Contacts with Central Asia were not uncommon in Syria's history up to this point, though it was mostly a matter of individuals or small groups seeking trade or political connections between Central Asia and the Mediterranean seaboard. The experience of the Mongol invasion of Syria in 1260 was to be of a different order. The Mongols were a central Asian people who originated in the present-day Mongolian Republic. At one point, they would establish an empire reaching from Hungary to Korea but their capacity to sustain such a reach was limited. Under Genghis Khan (d.1227), the Mongol army became a formidable force numbering probably over 100,000 men. Their main advantages were their mobility, their ruthlessness and a driving sense of destiny.¹ After defeating their ancestral enemies, the Tartars in 1202, Genghis Khan became the supreme ruler of his people in 1206. Northern China, Samarkand, Bukhara and southern Russia fell in rapid succession. By 1220 a huge Mongol army stood on the Oxus River gazing south into Persia. Genghis was distracted from moving west, however, by a campaign into India, returning home to die in 1227.

The first Mongol incursions entered north-eastern Syria (al-Jazira) in hot pursuit in 1231 but it was not until 1244 that they first targeted Ayyubid territory. The initial Ayyubid response was to seek an accommodation and the first embassy was sent to Karakoram shortly after al-Nasr Yusuf extended his power to Damascus in 1250. Ostensibly the mission returned with insignia symbolising that Damascus now stood under Mongol protection. If the Ayyubids believed through these gestures that the Mongols would be satisfied with nominal sovereignty, they were sadly wrong. The Mongol Great Khan (leader) Mongke had explicit and sweeping directives for two of his brothers. One brother was to take China, the other (Hulegu) to extend Mongol realms as far as the Nile. Hulegu raised a great army of some 120,000 men and descended on Iraq in 1257.

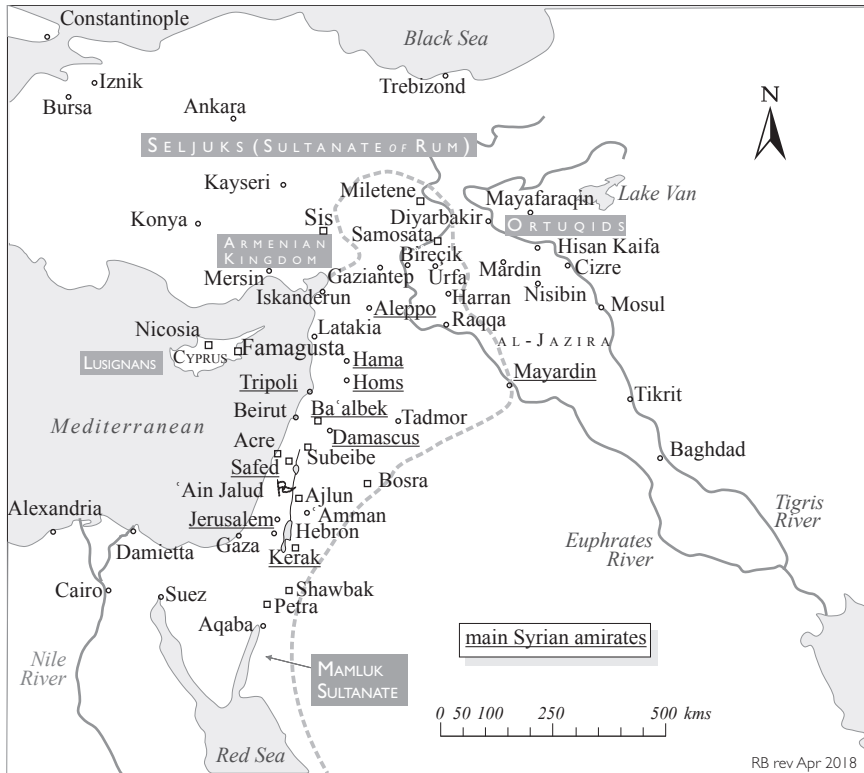


FIGURE 13.1 Aleppo–Damascus–Cairo – the Mamluk world

The response of al-Nasr Yusuf was paralysis. He abandoned further gestures of appeasement but nothing was done to shore up a defensive coalition. ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Musta‘sim, clinging to the shreds of his authority in Baghdad, shared this apparent indifference. Hulegu, still moving slowly, stalled his advance at Hamadan in Iran from where he sent envoys demanding the Ayyubids’ surrender. Only at this point did the Caliph take preventive action, and then merely in the form of seeking the support of Damascus by granting al-Nasr Yusuf the long-demanded title of sultan, hoping by this gesture to secure ‘a special defender of the Caliphate’.²

The Mongols’ taking and sack of Baghdad in 1258 still resonates down the centuries. By the time the Caliph had sent out the appeal to Damascus for a relieving army, Baghdad had already been invested; it surrendered before Damascus could assemble a force. The consequences were devastating. Baghdad’s population was massacred house by house; the monuments to 500 years of ‘Abbasid glory were razed; the Caliph, with his family, butchered.

The reaction in Damascus was panic in anticipation of the same fate. Al-Nasr Yusuf sent an embassy to Hulegu repeating his protestations of submission. Hulegu was unimpressed by the sultan’s failure to make the gesture himself (al-Nasr pleaded that the Crusader threat pinned him down in Damascus). With the Mongols now

in north-eastern Syria, al-Nasr Yusuf had no choice but to call on Cairo for aid. His plea coincided with a coup by the Cairo mamluks against the remaining symbolic Ayyubid leadership. It was the new mamluk strongman, Qutuz, who took up the response.

As the Mongols crossed the Euphrates and moved inexorably into northern Syria, refugees streamed south. The Damascus army assembled at Berze, five kilometres north of the capital, but al-Nasr Yusuf's perennial indecision held back its advance against the Mongol forces. A new bout of internal problems further weakened Yusuf's authority. Damascus moved towards catastrophe as if in a tightly scripted piece of theatre. Each step of Hulegu's progress was marked by a new phase in the disintegration of the Ayyubid state. Aleppo refused Hulegu's proposed surrender terms; the city was efficiently invested and fell within a week to the Mongol mangonels (January 1260). The slaughter went on in Aleppo for six days, the surviving women and children sent into slavery. The Great Mosque was set on fire, the Citadel destroyed. Homs and Hama opted for surrender.

In Damascus, Yusuf dithered over his final options. He eventually accepted advice to abandon the city and flee south to seek protection with the mamluks at Gaza. As the pathetic army and accompanying court scurried out of their camp at Berze, the city's fearful inhabitants, left 'defenceless in the face of the most horrible threat in their history', jeered from the city walls.³ The Ayyubids' 80-year rule ended in ignominy; the political capital that Saladin had so brilliantly accumulated was now all spent.

Hulegu had chosen to return to Mongolia from Aleppo, handing command to a Nestorian Christian general, Kitbugha. Although the Mongol force that proceeded south was considerably reduced (probably 10,000–20,000), the abandoned citizens of Damascus had no option but to surrender. Kitbugha received the delegation of the chief *qadi* and other notables before making his triumphal entry (February 1260). The transition was remarkably less bloody than in Baghdad or Aleppo, perhaps because the Mongols' intention was to preserve Damascus as their administrative base for Syria.⁴ But the story was not quite finished. From Gaza, al-Nasr made one last try. He induced the small garrison he had left in the Damascus Citadel to rebel against the Mongol occupation. The Mongols unleashed a massive artillery assault on the Citadel, using horses to bring 20 *trebuchets* (stone-throwing catapults) against the western walls. The garrison surrendered when it became apparent that al-Nasr was not going to fulfil his undertaking to return to the city with a relieving army. The upper walls of the fortress were dismantled to prevent further resistance.

Just as the Mongols gained control of most of Syria, their supremacy was dramatically challenged by the despatch of a Mamluk army from Cairo that gained a guarantee from the Crusaders of safe passage along the coast. Though the Ayyubid princes had already formally surrendered,⁵ the Mamluk forces decisively beat the Mongol army at the Battle of 'Ain Jalud (Palestine, September 1260). The Mamluks were clearly now masters in their own right in Syria, having disproved the myth of the Mongols' invincibility. Qutuz sent an envoy to take command of Damascus,

which the Mongols had already abandoned, bringing to an end the six-month Mongol interlude that had witnessed some extraordinary scenes. The Christian population of the city had taken advantage of the Christian links of Hulegu to indulge in provocative acts of impropriety directed at the Muslims. Brandishing a copy of the edict of Hulegu giving all faiths the right to practice openly, they had

overstepped the limit of tolerance and did things which had been forbidden them for centuries. They demonstrated along the streets of Bab Tuma claiming victory for Christianity and the defeat of Islam. In the middle of Ramadan, they sprinkled wine over the Muslims and across the portals of mosques.⁶

The Umayyad Mosque had been turned into a church and music and wine desecrated even this sacred precinct.

With the restoration of Muslim authority, the Damascus crowd took its revenge, destroying the main Christian church, Saint Mary's.⁷ Qutuz restored order in Damascus but did not survive to savour his new supremacy. He was murdered on his way back to Cairo by a group that included Baybars, first prominent for his role in another murder ten years beforehand, that of Turanshah which began the Mamluk's inexorable rise. After a decade of chaos, the usurper who showed supreme skills of 'action, resolution, courage, shrewdness, prescience and determination' was finally in power.⁸ Most critically, unlike Qutuz, Baybars enjoyed the unconditional support of the Bahriye guard (see page 223), thus initiating the line of mamluks dubbed 'Bahri'.

Baybars (1260–1277)

The new era began with a whirlwind. Baybars was tireless in putting the far-flung empire in order; no time to lose given possible new Mongol or Christian threats. One month he was in Syria bringing the Ayyubid governors to heel; the next menacing the Franks. He was in and out of Damascus whose treatment at his hands was initially moderate. Many of the Ayyubid *amirs* or military leaders were reappointed but after the Damascus governor refused to accept the new dispensation, in 1261 a Mamluk *na'ib al-sultana* (viceroy) was appointed and the city firmly subordinated to the imperial capital in Cairo. (A separate governor (*wali*) was appointed for the Citadel so that they could keep a check on each other.) The Damascus Citadel was repaired, requiring extensive rebuilding on the western and northern sides. Above the north-western tower a belvedere caught the refreshing breezes and the view over the orchards, meadows and tombs along the Barada.

Dividing his time between Cairo and Damascus, Baybars found time to perform *Hajj* in 1269. The Crusaders never knew where he would pop up next, his constant assaults fatally constricting the sliver of control they had managed to maintain along the coast. Between 1265 and 1271, he had punched several holes in the Crusader enclave – Caesarea, Jaffa, Arsuf – and reached inland to the fortress at

Beaufort. Antioch, the ultimate redoubt, was no longer Christian after 1268. He refortified the Ayyubids' castle at Subeibe, scowring over Baniyas from the lower slopes of Mount Hermon. Its massive bulk was as much an act of theatrical defiance as a forward post protecting Damascus or an eagle's nest surveying some of the richest Crusader territory in Galilee.⁹ The Mamluks now looked down on the remaining Crusader fortresses from every crest.

After that, his restless activities reached cruising speed. He fought 38 campaigns against his enemies; 15 of them he led personally. The Isma'ilis were brought to account, their fortresses in the coastal mountains of Syria no longer havens for crime and heresy. The Krak des Chevaliers, the great symbol of Crusader folly too far from the coast to withstand a determined assault, succumbed after a token fight. Shortly afterwards, the Templars' nearby northern base at Tartus fell and Marqab, the seemingly impregnable Hospitaller stronghold, now shared its revenues between the order and the Mamluks.

In less than 20 years, Baybars rebuilt the centralised empire of Saladin, this time even more tightly unified by secure communication including a rapid postal and carrier pigeon service to bring him intelligence almost in real time. He had revived the concept of *jihad* and accompanied it with a restored, but phoney, line of 'Abbasid Caliphs who were installed in pampered isolation outside Cairo. When he died in Damascus in 1277 Baybars had virtually written the obituary for the Crusader presence. His death (either from over-indulgence in fermented mare's milk or a collateral victim of a poison meant for an Ayyubid guest)¹⁰

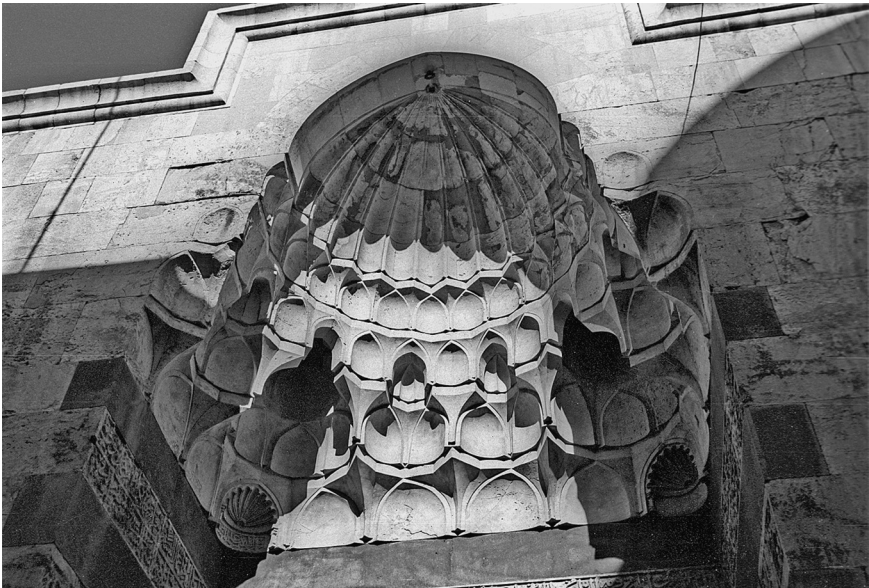


FIGURE 13.2 Madrasa Zahiriye, *muqarnas* canopy

befitted the life of this ruthless adventurer who had turned his energies to refashioning an empire.

Baybars was buried in the Damascus Citadel (not in his great mosque in Cairo which he 'gave up completely to God'; nor in Deraya as he had planned) amid few signs of public grief.¹¹ Later his body was transferred to the Madrasa Zahiriyeh. This was the house where Saladin had spent his boyhood and where he had first dismounted on entering the city in triumph in 1174. It was adapted as a funerary *madrasa* after being acquired by Baybars' son, Baraka Khan. Located in the Ayyubids' favoured necropolis area, a burial chamber and entrance doorway were added. The portal still announces the building's purpose with a superb flourish of *muqarnas* in deeply contrasting scoops of light and shade (Figure 13.2). The square burial chamber with central dome is extraordinarily bold in treatment. Its decoration, probably not completed until the reign of a successor, Qalawun, reverts to the style of the Umayyad Mosque, echoing the use of mosaic and classical decoration in bands running around the walls. The retro style, jumping five centuries of interrupted tradition, is the work of the architect, Ibrahim ibn Gana'im and probably the fruit of contemporary efforts to restore sections of the Great Mosque and of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.¹² The mosaic, mimicking even the foliage and fantasy pavilions of the Umayyads, is offset against spectacular Mamluk marquetry in marble (Figure 13.3). Although the mosaic is somewhat gawky compared with the superb synthesis of the eighth-century style, it represents a bold attempt to evoke al-Walid's inspiration, reminding us of Baybars' desire to bring about a brilliant new blending of existing traditions. Another such gesture from Baybars' reign is the superb wooden cenotaph he had made for the tomb of Khalid ibn al-Walid in Homs, transferred last century to the National Museum in Damascus.¹³

No trace remains of Baybars' spectacular palace, Qasr al-Ablaq, probably also the work of Gana'im.¹⁴ Famed for its bold use of contrasting black and ochre stone as well as its glass mosaics, it was a fitting scene for his Grand Guignol death. Located east of the Midan al-Akhdar (the Tekkiye and the National Museum now occupy the site), the palace represented a conscious effort to provide an alternative to the Citadel as place of residence, a consideration made practicable once the Crusader threat to the city had passed.¹⁵

Return of the Mongols

The Mongol army that had been beaten at 'Ain Jalud was a depleted force that in no way represented the full strength of Mongol power. The Ilkhans, the Mongol regime that succeeded in Persia to Mongke's kingdom, were still able to harass the Mamluk empire from occupied Iraq. As the Mamluk regime consolidated the new empire's capacity to fight a strategic threat, the Mongols avoided major expeditions into Syria but remained driven by an intense desire to punish the Mamluks for thwarting the Mongols' 'manifest destiny'.¹⁶ Baybars was forced to abandon much of north-east Syria, considering it a no-man's land subject to constant Mongol and Armenian raids, adopting a firmer defensive line along the Euphrates. Himself of



FIGURE 13.3 Baybars' Mausoleum, *mihrab*

Turkish background, Baybars was happy to pursue sound commercial and political relations with one branch of the Mongols, the Golden Horde in Russia, fellow enemies of the Persian Ilkhanate.

Two short-term minors succeeded Baybars before their guardian, Qalawun (r.1279–1290), took power. A sober-minded, experienced soldier and former mamluk of al-Salih Ayyub, Qalawun was already 60 on accession. First he had to assert his authority in Damascus where the new governor, Sunqur al-Ashqar, had refused to accept rule from Cairo, preferring the old Ayyubid practice of granting quasi-autonomy to the Syrian principalities. It took the sending of an army from Cairo to put down the revolt that had gained the support of the citizens of Damascus. Qalawun avoided entering the city until 1281 but, when he did

so, made known his view that 'Baybars hated the citizens of Damascus but I like them'; a feeling that was not to be reciprocated.¹⁷

Qalawun envisaged Damascus as a forward base when the Mongols returned to northern Syria in 1280. By October 1281, Qalawun assembled a force to meet the 80,000-strong Mongol army and marched north to Homs. Battle was joined on 29 October at Rastan (25 kilometres north of Homs). The Mongols were defeated, albeit at great cost to the Mamluk forces. Qalawun returned to Damascus parading his Mongol prisoners in triumph. The Mongol threat was held at bay for a further 20 years and Qalawun now asserted his claim to be considered one of the architects of the Mamluk empire: a status flaunted in the ambitious hospital-*madrasa*-tomb complex he was to undertake two years later in Cairo, significantly sited opposite the tomb of his former Ayyubid master, al-Salih Ayyub, as if to efface the stigma of the slave who had become sultan.¹⁸

Preoccupied by a fear that the Crusader enclaves could provide a platform for a major Mongol incursion, Qalawun now addressed the remaining Christian presence, occupying the great fortress at Marqab (1285) and ending the principality at Tripoli (1289). He died the next year outside Cairo during the army's preparations to march against Acre, the Crusaders' last great stronghold. The reign of his son and successor, al-Ashraf Khalil (r.1290–1293), was a 'long nightmare' of vicious reprisals against those who had blocked his succession. He found in external affairs, however, the 'courage, ability and vigour' to mount the last assault to remove the Crusaders.¹⁹ In 1291, Acre fell, followed by Tartus and Athlit later the same year. After 192 years, the Crusades were at an end. On 3 June 1291, Khalil made a triumphal entry to Damascus with his prisoners; a victory celebration in which the Damascenes joined, for the moment setting aside the sultan's unsavoury reputation.

Most of the next 50 years were to be dominated by the reign of a son of Qalawun, al-Nasr Muhammad (r.1298–1341), taking office as a child. The years of the new sultan's minority, before he took office for a third time in his own right in 1310, were marked by chaos and factionalism on a spectacular scale. Early in his reign, the Mongols under Ghazan (ironically the first of the Mongol conquerors to embrace Islam as the official religion) returned for their most destructive descent on Damascus. This new incursion had resulted from the flight of a disaffected *na'ib* of Damascus, Saif al-Din Qibjaq, who crossed into Mongol territory east of the Euphrates and sought the intercession of Ilkhan Ghazan in his restoration. Ghazan was happy to agree, particularly given a number of recent Mamluk attempts to destabilise the Mongol presence in Mesopotamia and eastern Turkey.

The Mamluk army, hastily despatched from Cairo, had suffered a serious reversal near Homs in December 1299. Damascus was left exposed and surrendered without a struggle (January 1300). Qibjaq was restored under a joint administration (Mamluk rebels and Mongols) but the Citadel held out for the Mamluks while the invaders assaulted it from inside the walled city, resulting in great damage to the zone between the Great Mosque and the Citadel. Many buildings were deliberately incinerated, including Nur al-Din's Dar al-Hadith al-Ashrafiye and his law courts. The occupation was harsh, although this wave of Mongols comprised

fellow Muslims. The joint administration collapsed, the new rulers having looted the city to the point where their rule lacked any support. Qibjaq negotiated his return to the Mamluk fold. After withdrawing, the Mongols returned in 1303 and were decisively beaten by the Mamluk army at Marj al-Suffar south of Kiswe on 22 April, their troops slaughtered when they tried to storm a stream to slake their thirst. The Mamluk army 'fell upon them, harvesting their heads as men harvest barley with a sickle'.²⁰ The people of Damascus streamed out to congratulate the sultan. The Mongol threat had been definitively deflected, only one tenth of Ghazan's force returned home.

The Mamluk system

It would be wise to pause for a moment to look at the condition of southern Syria at this time. The narrative has reached a period rich in surviving accounts of Arab geographers and chroniclers. Baybars' accession had marked the start of 250 years during which Damascus was to be governed by a regime that won little affection from the Damascenes. Remote in terms of origin from the majority Arab base population, the Turkish (later, after 1382, largely Circassian) sultans, surrounded by concentric rings of fellow mamluk *amirs*, expected only unquestioning loyalty and basic services. There was never the respect that the Zengid and Ayyubid rulers, at least initially, had built up. Theirs was a tough, highly centralised military regime in which Damascus was totally subordinated to the whims and priorities of Cairo.

After the Crusaders' departure in 1291, the lack of the common bond that *jihad* had forged meant that there was little love lost between the Damascenes and their ruthless rulers and no one was too impressed at the legitimacy sought by attempts to revive the Baghdad Caliphate. Nevertheless, the Mamluks were to develop a role as patrons of architecture and Islamic scholarship and the society prospered in periods of firm but fair rule, such as under the long governorship of Tengiz during the sultanate of al-Nasr Muhammad. Damascus was particularly enriched by an influx of refugees fleeing the Mongols' attacks on Baghdad and its atmosphere was relatively free compared with the capital. One of the foremost Islamic thinkers of the era was Taki al-Din Ahmed ibn Taymiya (1263–1328) whose family had fled Harran before the Mongols and settled in Damascus. His strict brand of Hanbali orthodoxy²¹ was at times an irritant to Mamluk governors (his last days were spent in confinement in the Damascus Citadel) but he usefully rallied the citizens with his calls for *jihad* against the Mongols in 1300.

The zeal of the newly converted (mamluks were initially taken from non-Islamic families and brought up as Muslims) was brought out in the Mamluks' magnificent patronage of *madrasas* and mosques, particularly in Cairo. Such endowments were perhaps equally intended to atone for the 'low standard of their public morals'²² and the genuine piety of the early Ayyubid court gave way to more obvious self-promotion. The mamluks also found it convenient to encourage the more fanatical theologians as a means of social control. Much of this promotion through learning and benevolence was funded by the proceeds of international trade.

This was the heyday of the Venetian and other Italian merchant presence in the Levant. Thriving commerce, partly driven by Europe's recently acquired taste for sugar, underwrote much of the Mamluks' capacity to indulge their architectural and decorative fantasies.

The Mamluks may have been tough but they were also organised and relatively predictable. Territory was no longer defined by the squabbling between Ayyubid princes. Damascus was the capital of the major governorate (*mamlaka*) after Egypt, the last stepping-stone to the sultanate and often regarded as a rival to the capital. Its territory was confined by the central authority to the southern half of the original Roman province of Syria, extending as far as Tadmor (Palmyra) to the east and Homs–Hama in the north. Its coastline was hemmed in by Palestine and Tripoli, both separate *mamlaka*. The system of two layers of centralised control at local level continued, through a military governor (*na'ib*) and a civil administrator (*wali*). Any vestiges of an autonomous local administration that survived the late Ayyubids disappeared but as recompense, the standard of administration, at least in the first half of the Mamluk period, reflected a specific obligation on the part of the rulers to improve the lot of the town dwellers. The administrative structure built on the Ayyubid base. It included an effective taxation system as well as an administrative cadre that ensured continuity even in troubled times. Local administration was thorough and efficient, as we learn from the accounts of European travellers, with systems for the control of functions as diverse as weights and measures to street cleaning.

Islamic law was applied with apparent consistency, though the state kept a close watch on the activities of mosques. The relationship with the Islamic religious leadership, the *'ulama*, was generally correct and harmonious. Broadly the religious leadership was left to control education and justice. Given the need for resources to maintain the state, the points of friction were often over the extent to which Islamic law allowed the state to impose new taxes. In Damascus, Christian and Jewish communities, each numbering several thousand, continued to pay the *jizya* or poll tax and were allowed to regulate their personal affairs according to their religions' precepts through representatives chosen by the communities but approved by the state. There were occasional outbreaks of active persecution of the Christian and Jewish communities or the enforcement of distinctive dress codes. Churches, as we have seen, suffered reprisals when Christians were suspected of collaborating with the Mongols and the number of churches within the walls had perhaps dwindled to two or three.²³

The trading bourgeoisie practically vanished in favour of the mamluk class and Arabs were kept out of all key posts including the army. Most high military officials had access to the proceeds of agricultural estates through the *iqta'* system, a form of feudalism which did not confer permanent ownership of the land on its benefactors. The countryside was left poor and the peasantry numerous, constantly asked to contribute more, notably through special contributions to finance wars. Meanwhile the leadership grew rich on the proceeds and perpetuated their rule by continual 'recruitment' of fresh mamluks among the young men of non-Muslim

populations, either direct from the lands controlled by the Golden Horde or from the slave markets of the region.

A new prosperity

With the Mongols crushed at Marj al-Suffar outside Damascus in 1303 (see page 249) and the Crusaders now only a vague off-shore threat, the long years of al-Nasr Muhammad's stable autocracy represented perhaps the 'golden age' of Mamluk rule.²⁴ For the first time, apart from the years of stability under Nur al-Din and Saladin, the Muslim world had an unchallenged central authority to bind its diverse elements. This new assurance and sense of a unified order would be reflected in the architecture sponsored by the regime, best symbolised by the symmetry of al-Nasr Muhammad's great mosque in the Cairo Citadel.

Damascus had enjoyed solid economic expansion under the early Mamluks. It had pulled ahead of Jerusalem in recovering from the two centuries of strife touched off by the Crusades. The irregular pattern of invasions, sackings, earthquakes and two serious plague outbreaks that had marked the thirteenth century now seemed behind it. Its industries began to thrive and the city quickly profited from such new technologies as the production of paper that was yet to make the same impact in Europe as it had in China in replacing cumbersome parchment for the recording of information. Other industries were textiles, glassware, perfumes and essences as well as by-products of its agricultural hinterland such as sugar, gum and pistachios. The arms industry remained a mainstay of the heavier manufacturing sector.

The Mamluks based a proportion of their army permanently in Damascus and used it *inter alia* to guard the northern component of the annual *Hajj* to Mecca. The caravan assembled along the Damascus Midan before embarking on its five-week desert journey to the Hijaz, where the Mamluks claimed sovereignty at least during the pilgrimage season. The Midan's religious and economic significance now grew exponentially. It stretched well beyond the Musalla Mosque, not only provisioning the city with its grain needs (usually from the Hauran) but also supplying the annual caravan.

Immediately under the Citadel on its north side the Taht al-Qala'at quarter served the needs of the cavalry (saddlery, feed). Increasingly hemmed in between the Citadel and what remained of the old Greek hippodrome, Taht al-Qala'at also housed a sort of nightly fairground with 'clowns, jugglers, conjurers and story tellers'.²⁵ To the west it touched the monuments already clustered on the Upper Sharaf. The Saruja quarter was to become a prosperous garden suburb surviving amid the tombs and orchards virtually until the end of the Ottoman period.²⁶

While the present-day walled city was by then impossibly crowded, there were many other recreation areas still available on the city's outskirts: the banks of the Barada; the more accessible parts of the Ghouta with their orchards and plantations; the gorge of Rabwe; the groves north of the Bab al-Salaam; the slopes of Salahiye with streams and mills still interspersed between the tombs and *madrasas* of this holy quarter which caught the refreshing breezes of an evening.

Foreigners

Damascus had never been closed to international visitors but it was not on the Christian pilgrimage route like Jerusalem or other centres associated with the life of Christ. Occasional visitors passed this way and we have brief glimpses of their observations from the late seventh century. The Crusades had impeded free access for Christian Europeans though there were exceptions but Damascus was normally seen as a Muslim holy place, not for Christians. In 1233, however, the Friars Minor (Franciscans) obtained permission from Sultan al-Ashraf Musa to minister to the Christians of Damascus and members of the order were soon able to pass via Damascus on their way to the Holy Land. Italian merchants had already broken the Papal embargo which had failed to inhibit the free flow of trade between Damascus and the Crusader enclaves, even at the height of the confrontation.

Trade between Europe and the east then became a major activity again. In Mamluk times trade was a major source of the Empire's revenue. It was well recognised that those responsible for importing the spices, gems, fabrics, steel, glass, carpets and bullion into European markets needed a presence on the ground in the east, particularly after the Italian states' business flourished after 1345. A formal treaty with Venice extended commercial privileges to the Venetians on a more secure basis. The regular renewal of the trading privileges granted to the Venetians resulted in the inscription of their rights on a stone pillar placed at one of the main cross-roads in central Damascus.²⁷ Annual convoys between Venice and Alexandria were permitted with the first Italian *funduqs* (from the Italian *fondacos* or 'factories') established not only at the Levantine ports but in the inland entrepôts such as Aleppo and Damascus.²⁸ Until the fifteenth century, Damascus was still the major commercial centre of Syria in spite of the growing importance of Aleppo, and included foreign communities from Venice, Catalonia, Genoa, Florence, Calabria and France. Foreign consuls began to be appointed. This perhaps encouraged other curious Europeans who began to visit Damascus as part of pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

European travellers' accounts begin to describe the city in extravagant terms, comparing it more than favourably with European centres. This transitory 'inferiority complex' was later to be reversed by the Renaissance and the industrial revolution in Europe. One of the first of the centuries-long plague of 'travel writers' was Sir John Maundeville, who included Damascus in his travelogue of the 1330s. It seems doubtful if the good knight reached Damascus since his brief recital of legends fails to mention any personal observation of the city beyond the number of 'wells'.²⁹ The Franciscan friar, Niccolo da Poggibonsi, visited in 1348 and provided an exuberant description of a city considerably larger, in his view, than Florence or Paris.³⁰ In 1432, the French traveller, Bertrandon de la Brocquière, managed to reach Damascus but found the city's welcome was lacking. Made to dismount from his horse before entering, in accordance with the rule that Christians could not ride through the streets, de la Brocquière also encountered an unexpected objection to black hats. One of the onlookers gave his broad beaver hat a blow with his staff, almost touching off an unseemly fracas.

I mention this circumstance to show the inhabitants of Damascus are a wicked race and consequently care should be taken to avoid any quarrels with them . . . You must not joke with them, nor at the same time seem afraid, nor appear poor, for then they will despise you; nor rich, for they are very avaricious.³¹

His curiosity was focused on sites with a Christian association, particularly the story of Saint Paul which was to continue to fascinate travellers over the coming centuries but he also provides us with one of the first outsider's accounts of the spectacle of the returning *Hajj* caravan.³² An account of the city at this time is also preserved in the journal of the Moroccan traveller, ibn Batuta, who visited in 1326 and provided a lengthy and enthusiastic description much of it concentrating on the city's religious life and practices.³³

Both da Poggibonsi and de la Brocquière gave the population of Damascus as around 100,000. Allowing for some exaggeration, 80,000 seems a reasonably reliable guesstimate. The overall population of the province of Syria was possibly 25 times that of Damascus, reflecting ratios that are comparable to the area's population base in Roman times.³⁴ Prosperity and relative security meant that the city outside the walls was now more populous than that within. The periphery often attracted more rapturous descriptions by travellers than the city itself, with ibn Jubayr and ibn Batuta particularly struck by the tranquillity and beauty of garden areas such as Rabwe and Salihīye, the latter now flourishing as a centre of Hanbali religious activities.

Many of the descriptions focused on the strength of the city's defences and the range of facilities provided within the Citadel: bath, mill, mosque and even shops in addition to the royal apartments and the governor's palace. Most, however, focused on the quality of daily life and the provision of services well above the standard in Europe: the variety of prepared food available from street merchants ('since the people over there did no cooking at home'); the range of fruits and particularly its freshness, assured in summer by being stored and presented in snow.³⁵ Particularly to be marvelled at was the variety of manufactured goods in the *sūqs*. No greater range of the world's finest brocades, cotton and silks could be imagined, not to mention its famed metalware and finest swords. 'Really all Christendom could be supplied for a year with the merchandise of Damascus'.³⁶ The evidence of security in the streets, the fact that the markets were neat and clean, and the provision of amenities unknown in Europe such as street lighting and covered markets were subjects of awe.

One of the most welcome aspects of Damascus to the visitor was its liberal provisioning in water, still drawing on the system installed by the Romans twelve centuries before. Water seemed to flow at every turn, through canals, water wheels and mills on the outskirts, streams around and under the city. Practically every house, Bertrandon de la Brocquière marvelled, was provided with a fountain and ibn Jubayr found the city 'sickened with the superfluity of water'.³⁷ This abundance allowed a proliferation of baths or *hammams* in a

city that has preserved the practice even to the present day, a remarkable percentage still serving their original purpose. Among those of the Mamluk era still functioning commercially are the Hammam al-Jadid in the Qanawat quarter, the Hammam Qaimariye in the quarter of that name east of the Umayyad Mosque and the Muqaddam Hammam in Salhiye. Though the last of these has been heavily restored in recent decades, the first two retain much of their original decoration.³⁸

Trade and travel did little to encourage what would be called today an interchange of ideas but the Italian connection perhaps inspired some curiosity about eastern customs.³⁹ Even a figure of the stature of Dante was clearly influenced by the widely disseminated ideas of the mystic, ibn al-ʿArabi (d.1240), whose inspirational role in his last years in Damascus has been mentioned above (pages 228–9). Though admittedly Dante’s overall depiction of Islam was a negative one, his *Divine Comedy* used the device of an allegorico-mystical journey modelled on the ideas of al-ʿArabi.⁴⁰ Certainly the role of Damascus as a centre for Sufi thought was developing apace along with most other aspects of Islamic inquiry, including history.

The city’s *khans* became increasingly vital in the regulation of the entrepôt role of Damascus. Greater security brought more reliable links to the coast and Beirut began to earn for the first time the label of ‘port of Damascus’.⁴¹ Commerce gravitated towards the area west and south of the Umayyad Mosque, where it remains today. Though the locations of several Mamluk *khans* are known from literary sources, only two survive. Khan al-Dikka, on the northern side of Suq Midhat Pasha (western end of Straight Street) is in a very fragmentary state. (It was noted on page 77 that the columns embedded in the building were recycled from the colonnade that graced the classical *decumanus*.) Khan Jaqmaq (1418, rebuilt 1601) lies 30 metres to the east in the Suq Midhat Pasha. The same governor of Damascus who built the *khan*, endowed a beautiful *madrassa* that survives intact immediately north of the Great Mosque, the Madrasa Jaqmaqiye, now serving as the Museum of Epigraphy.

The most splendid events on the city’s annual calendar remained the arrival and departure of the Meccan pilgrimage caravan. European descriptions particularly ogled the spectacle of the joyous return: crowds of Damascenes rushed out of the city to greet the *mahmal*, a camel that had carried the symbolic gifts for the tomb of the Prophet at Medina, along with the accompanying musicians, drummers, ceremonial guards (‘some bearing crossbows, others drawn swords, others small harquebuses which they fired off every now and then’), grand ladies, ‘Moors, Turks, Barbaresques, Tartars, Persians, and other sectaries of the prophet Mohammed’.⁴²

Mamluk building

The later Mamluks remained enthusiastic builders and we have examined already their inclination to see architecture as a means of projecting their power while

remedying their failings before God. Most projects were facilitated by the further development of the institution of the *waqf* or pious endowment; 'never before had it been used by the ruling elite as extensively as the Mamluks', serving as a legal way to keep fortunes protected from taxes and death duties.⁴³ The Mamluks' choice of structures freed the urban landscape from reliance on stand-alone symmetry, introducing more dynamic relationships between buildings, their individual elements and their surrounds. There is nothing in their extensive building program in Damascus which rivals the bold use of space or the grandiloquence of their architectural gestures in Cairo where their great *madrasas* and mosques still grace the central parts of al-Qahira, first developed under the Fatimids. Between 1250 and 1517 the Mamluks constructed some 2,279 projects throughout their empire, according to the catalogue prepared by the late Michael Meinecke. His list gives a total of 930 documented projects in Cairo, 253 for Damascus, 232 for Aleppo and 147 for Jerusalem.⁴⁴ Substantial remains survive of 500, almost half of which are in Cairo (217). Of the remainder, Jerusalem and Damascus retain around 60 surviving projects. Though much smaller in population (perhaps 5,000–10,000), Jerusalem, whose significance was religious rather than political, managed to rival Damascus in Mamluk endowments. It became the place of retirement or banishment of former *amirs* and pious widows and was a centre of Islamic scholarship with many new projects clustered around the Haram al-Sharif. Jerusalem and, on a smaller scale, Hebron, also benefited from their promotion as places of pilgrimage.

Damascus though long by-passed as the imperial capital was a city that continued to enjoy considerable prestige. While the scale of individual Damascus projects often did not rival those of Cairo, the city remains the next major repository of Mamluk architecture given that few of the Jerusalem monuments survive for their original purpose and have interiors that are either inaccessible or considerably modified. The fact that the survival rate in Damascus was proportionately lower than in Jerusalem indicates the difficulties of preserving buildings in a city that retained a substantial population and constantly renewed itself on the same small footprint. In the Damascus catalogue, however, most Mamluk buildings still serve religious or educational purposes and are complemented as sources by a rich range of literary material.

The majestic dimensions of the Umayyad Mosque continued to dominate the Damascene architectural imagination. In establishing his stature with the Damascus *'ulama* in his early years in power, Baybars had chosen to initiate major repair work on the Mosque. Much of the dome and parts of the mosaic panels were restored in an attempt to emulate the original neo-Byzantine style, though a good deal of this work would later be lost in the 1893 fire.⁴⁵ It was noted earlier that Sultan Qalawun even tried to emulate in the mosaic decoration of the burial chamber of his former patron, Baybars, the panels of the Mosque's walls which still gleamed with much of their original splendour.

We have several visitors' accounts of the central role still played by the Umayyad Mosque in the spiritual and intellectual life of the city.

The Mosque is full of people during the day and (the) ends of the night, because people go through it to schools, *sūqs* and houses. . . Its times are always full with goodness and prayers. One hardly sees it without worshippers, a meditator, a chanter of the Qur'an, a mu'adhdhin (caller to prayer), a reader in a book of science, an inquirer about a religious matter, an expositor of a sectarian opinion, or a seeker for a solution for a problem. Some people come in search of a chat, others to meet friends, or to stroll in its court, enjoying the beauties of the moon and stars.

*al-'Umari (fourteenth century)*⁴⁶

The tradition of Islamic teaching through *madrasas* and centres for more speculative thought such as *khanqahs* was by now intimately associated with Damascus and remained a key to its role in the Muslim world. Following the practice established since Burid times, Damascus schools were well endowed and continuing support from the Mamluk establishment was assured: it was part of the profile of a good leader. Teachers were well paid and numerous, while Damascus became particularly famed for the range of its Sufi mystics, a tradition that owed its origins to Mohi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi (d.1240) buried in Salahiye (see pages 228–9).

The exchange of ideas was greatly facilitated by the stability the empire enjoyed, enabling artisans as well as thinkers to travel widely for employment. In building, the gravitational pull was towards Cairo though Syrian craftsmen were also drafted for the rash of Mamluk building projects in Jerusalem and Hebron. So great was the outflow of skills from Syria under the early Mamluks that by the fourteenth century it had to be corrected by dispatching teams of Cairo-based workmen for major projects in Damascus during the governorship of Tengiz. Other sources of inspiration included Timurid Turkestan, closer to the homeland of the early Mamluks. Initially, there was no unified Mamluk architectural canon. Though an imperial style with common features developed, perhaps encouraged by a centralised atelier, it remained heavily dependent on ideas brought from the major provincial schools in Aleppo and Damascus. In Damascus the architectural traditions of the past remained current and the city was slow to adopt some of the standard features of Cairo architecture such as the shallow indented frames around windows and the octagonal form for the minaret. Moreover, Damascus remained wedded to its preference for flamboyant stonework in contrasting colours that reflected the locally available basalt and limestone and was eventually to be adopted in many Mamluk monuments. The Syrian love for elaborate *muqarnas* canopies draped over doorways and filling the corners under domes spread into Cairene repertoires in the fourteenth century.

New Islamic schools were established and old ones greatly expanded. A total of 78 were operating in Damascus in the Mamluk period for men plus two for women.⁴⁷ The Madrasa al-'Umariye in Salahiye, set up as a Hanbali monastery (as we have seen, see page 200), was now greatly expanded. The two existing *maristans* were supplemented by four more medical facilities reflecting the attention given to medical care at the time.

The Mamluk leadership in Damascus continued the emphasis on Salahiye as the prestige necropolis nestling in the shadow of the 'holy mountain'. An important lead project was the late thirteenth century tomb of Taki al-Din al-Takritiye (d.1299), one of Qalawun's viziers who had served four other sultans in his lifetime. The Turba Takritiye became the new model for the simple tomb-*madrasa* with a small prayer hall and a burial chamber either side of a central corridor. The *turba* with its masterful *muqarnas* doorway continues the sober Ayyubid style but the use of Andalusian themes in the prayer hall's richly decorated sculptured plaster walls is an 'isolated, spontaneous transplantation', a final flowering of the master architect's taste for bold experimentation.⁴⁸

A further departure from the sobriety of the Ayyubid style is evident in another tomb built four years later, the Turba of Kitbugha (d.1302). A Mongol who for a brief period (1294–1296) held the throne in Cairo, Kitbugha was deposed by another usurper, Lajin al-Mansuri, and imprisoned in the Damascus Citadel. He was serving as governor of Hama at the time of his death. While following the twin-domed chambers of the Takritiye plan, the tomb builds on the bi-chrome flourishes of the late Ayyubid style by employing black-ochre wheel-like roundels above the façade windows. The tomb stands at the westernmost edge of Muhajrin (Map 8).

In the northern part of the Midan, the Midan al-Hasa, a pebble-strewn area (hence 'field of gravel' – combined polo field, exercise ground and overflow camping for large caravans or delegations) served too as part of the facilities used to service the *Haji*. It supplemented the Midan al-Akhdar west of the city as well as providing exercise space for the Mamluk leadership and was enclosed by a wall from 1291. In the area now found south of Yarmuk Square, a new crop of monuments sprang up from the early fourteenth century. This zone extended towards another area further south, already favoured for prestige tombs from 1260, hence its medieval Arabic name al-Qubaybat ('little domes').⁴⁹ Most of the domes have disappeared but the road, considerably wider in those days than the present confined thoroughfare, appears to have been a favoured burial area in the late Mamluk period, with tombs and *madrasas* clustered along the route to Mecca in a way analogous (but on a smaller scale) to the Mamluk cemeteries north of Cairo.⁵⁰ One of the surviving institutions in Qubaybat from this era, the Mosque al-Karimiye when established in 1318 by a visiting *qadi*, must originally have been isolated from the city. The mosque, which is back from and not aligned to the modern street, comprises a large courtyard with a minaret (undecorated except for an octagonal balcony) on the north side. Smaller buildings of the period survive in Qubaybat including the Madrasa Qunshliye (1320). North of the elevated expressway that now bisects the Midan lies the Mausoleum of Altunbugha (1329). Both are hidden away behind the present-day façades on the east side of the street.

Tengiz's governorship (1312–1340)

Al-Nasr Muhammad's third reign (1310–1341) ushered in the 'golden age' noted above (page 242). Now 24, the sultan was no longer a mere mascot for the

squabbling *amirs* as he had been in his first two incumbencies. While on campaign in Syria, he was installed by a popular movement among the citizens of Damascus who had refused to accept the authority of a governor representing the Circassian faction in Cairo. He was determined to restore the sultanate on the lines firmly established under Qalawun. 'Pious and austere in observing the prescriptions of Islam, flamboyant and extravagant where no such constraints applied . . . He was certainly one of the greatest Mamluk sultans; he was perhaps one of the nastiest'.⁵¹ He gradually asserted his power over the senior *amirs* whose bitter struggles had brought much of the instability of recent decades, partly provoking the Mongol incursions that had so badly destabilised the region.

Among the first gestures of stabilisation undertaken by the new sultan was the appointment of his own trusted mamluks to key governorships. To Damascus he appointed Saif al-Din Tengiz al-Husami, who was to hold the post for an extraordinary 28 years (1312–1340). His mamluk background did not prevent Tengiz from acquiring a broad grounding in Arabic culture and Islam. His period in office was to result in a 'massive programme of urban restoration' and he consciously sought to improve not just the monumental side of the city but its practical amenities such as pavements and water supply.⁵²

Tengiz's monuments have survived in part in Damascus but not his governor's palace, only a few remnants of which have been found in the Palais 'Azem.⁵³ The most accessible example of the style adopted under Tengiz is seen on Sharia Nasr. On the former site of the Byzantine church of Saint Nicholas, west of the city, he constructed, fairly early in his governorship, a mosque that has all but been engulfed by later construction. As conceived, the Mosque of Tengiz took full advantage of its location in the meadows (*al-mardf*) outside of the walls. Its courtyard straddled a branch of the Barada flowing through a park-like setting complete with wooden water wheels (*norias*). A late sixteenth century Arab account praised its advantages both as a 'pleasurable promenade and place of prayer'.⁵⁴ De Thévenot in 1664 described the 'spacious courtyard environed by a cloister whereof the arches are supported by many great marble pillars' and originally paved in stones from the church.⁵⁵ More practically, the courtyard built over the Barada served as a point for loading camels with water before the trip to Mecca.

The present mosque has lost all this atmosphere of semi-rural calm. Already the Mamluk taste for the overblown is evident in the coarser use of banner-like stretches of contrasting stone and the striving for effect in the elaborate shape of the canopy above the eastern doorway. (The gate was later duplicated further west along the Sharia Nasr façade, the pair now serving as bookends to a modern shopping façade.) To the north, the minaret is a late fourteenth century rebuilding, as the original was destroyed by fire not long after construction. It was one of the first in Damascus to yield to the Cairene fashion for octagonal forms. (It is best viewed in the lane to the rear of the modern mosque.) The site served many other purposes including a nineteenth century military school until restored as a mosque in the mid-twentieth century.

The expansion of the official presence to the west was also evident in the mosque erected on the opposite bank of the Barada after 1346 by Tengiz's

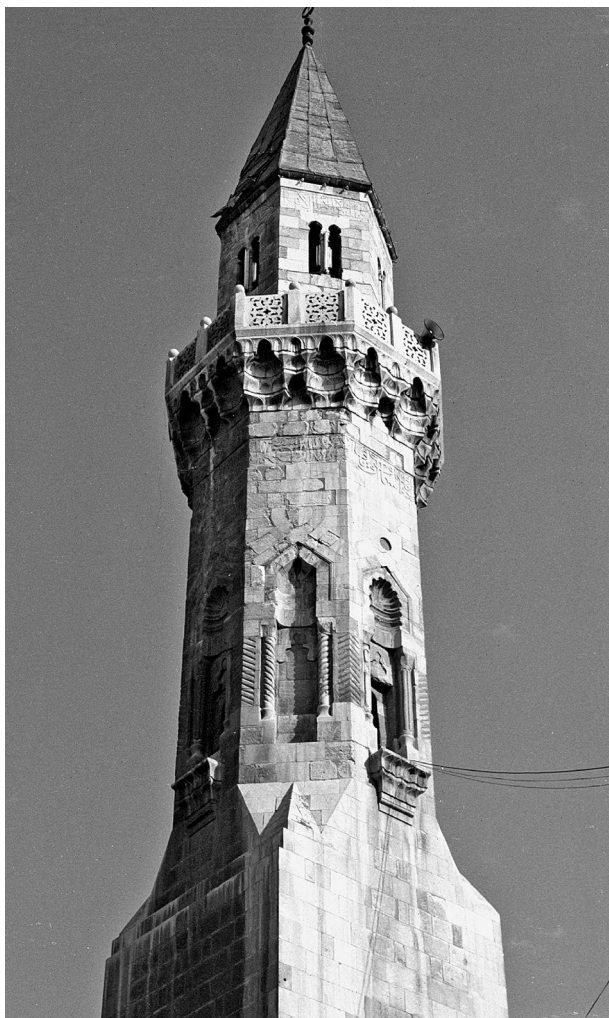


FIGURE 13.4 Minaret of Tengiz Mosque

successor, Yalbugha al-Yahyawi. The mosque was located on the northern side of the future Merdje Square and like many of the Friday mosques took its layout from the courtyard style of the Great Mosque. It was, however, much abused over the centuries and its remains were removed after 1975 to make way for an urban redevelopment project.

Tengiz was removed from office, transported to prison in Alexandria and poisoned there in 1340 on the order of the sultan who 'had made Tengiz so powerful that, in the end, he became afraid of him'.⁵⁶ The sultan feared that on his own death (al-Nasr Muhammad was to die a year later), Tengiz might lead Syria in revolt against his designated heir, Saif al-Din Abu Bakr. Tengiz's body was embalmed

and taken back to Damascus to lie in the *turba* on the south-eastern corner of his mosque. His wife had died ten years before and her tomb is found, in a dilapidated state, in the western part of the old city, south-west of the Umayyad Mosque (Turba Kukabaye). Its *muqarnas* doorway foreshadows on a smaller scale its counterpart outside her husband's tomb. The twin-chambered building (the domed mausoleum was matched by a small monastery for women) is now suffocated by commercial life, its central entrance passage cluttered with wares.

Most of the other surviving monuments from Tengiz's period are also tombs, some reverting to the simpler Ayyubid style (for example the Turba Kujkun al-Mansuri (1322–1323) on the western side of Salihiye, jammed in between brutalist apartment blocks). A neglected non-funereal exception is the Koranic school endowed by Tengiz just before his banishment. Located immediately behind the bath of Nur al-Din east of the Suq al-Bazuriye, the Dar al-Hadith al-Tengiziye



FIGURE 13.5 Dar al-Hadith al-Tengiziye, doorway

is still a school, the most notable remains being the exceptionally fine and well-preserved *muqarnas* doorway. On the whole, though, Tengiz is not as well represented in Damascus as his reputation would allow, his greatest surviving work being the huge bazaar complex west of the Haram in Jerusalem, the Suq al-Quttanin, around which are still clustered many monuments to his enthusiasm for construction.⁵⁷

Perhaps the most noteworthy of the buildings endowed just after Tengiz's time is the Madrasa al-ʿAjami (or Turba al-Afriduniye), a minor masterpiece erected by a local businessman, Afridun al-ʿAjami (d.1348) which shows the confident absorption of the early Mamluk style within the Damascus tradition. The building (western side of Midan Street just south of the Suq al-Sinaniye), though today unrestored and plastered with posters, shows the new Mamluk repertoire in its full confidence: roundels, joggled stonework, shallow window settings, a high entrance *muqarnas* enclosing a boldly patterned panel. For the first time, Damascus yielded to the Mamluks' tastes in all their exuberance. Even behind the façade, in spite of the building's small dimensions, the layout followed the cruciform plan. Another striking example of the high Mamluk style survives not far to the north in the Sanjakdar Mosque, which lies on the western side of al-Thawra Street across from the Citadel. Though modestly withdrawn behind the modern street alignment, the doorway is a magnificently theatrical statement with its soaring *muqarnas* canopy surmounting a panel weaving a complex spandrelled rosette in coloured stone. The Cairo style, as Meinecke observes, had triumphed.⁵⁸ The persistence of local traditions, however, is illustrated in the almost contemporary Mausoleum of Araq, a modest double tomb on the upper Midan erected by Amir Araq al-Silahdar who died in 1349.



FIGURE 13.6 Madrasa al-ʿAjami, façade



FIGURE 13.7 Mosque of Sanjakdar, façade



FIGURE 13.8 Mausoleum of Araq, doorway

Source: photo by M. Greenhalgh

Decline (1341–1382)

Al-Nasr Muhammad's death (1341) marked the onset of a new period of turbulence in which it is 'difficult to find a narrative thread that will make sense of

it all'.⁵⁹ Al-Nasr was still only 56 at his death but his best days were long behind him. So too were the empire's. Al-Nasr's appointed heir and son, al-Mansur Abu Bakr, lasted only three months, easily supplanted by another son, Quseen. So easily, in fact, that the useful lesson was imparted that anyone could change a sultan if he had sufficient mamluk support. The seeds had been sown long ago by allowing the sons of mamluks to become mamluks. Feuding between the senior *amirs*, various descendants of Qalawun (r.1279–1290), had grown to the point where all seemed intent on wiping each other out with bewildering rapidity. By the fourteenth century the regime had long abandoned the practice of reliance on fresh recruitment to replenish its ranks. Succession more often had to be settled within the family. Three generations of al-Nasr Muhammad's descendants alternated in a bewildering game of musical chairs that lasted two decades (1341–1363).

Damascus, still restive at its junior position in the empire, revolted in 1346 but only succeeded in touching off a new wave of bloodletting in Cairo. In the next year, the Black Death (a severe outbreak of bubonic plague originating in Central Asia) arrived in the Mamluk domains. It spread via Alexandria to Syria in 1348 where it was rampant in Damascus in July. The Moroccan traveller, ibn Tulun, described in vivid terms the efforts of the inhabitants of various faiths to join in combating the pestilence through prayer.

All the inhabitants of the town – men, women, children, the aged – took part in the procession. The Jews came out with their Pentateuchs, the Christians with their Gospels . . . All wept, sought mercy and the help of God through His books and His prophets. They all assembled at the Mosque of Qadem where they remained beseeching God.⁶⁰

Ignorance as to the nature of the plague and how it was spread left populations little defence until the disease's intensity died away, a process that took at least eight months. The plague was raging in October when one visitor described 'a mighty wind which provoked a great yellow dust cloud, then red, then black, until the earth was darkened by it entirely'. Surmising that such winds which fanned the pestilence could equally blow it away, 'the people hoped that this cataclysm marked the end of their distress. But the number of deaths did not decrease'.⁶¹ At its peak, the death rate in Damascus must have been more than 1,000 on some days, still at 500 per day in March 1349. So great was the pressure on burials that there were days when bodies could not be accommodated within the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque and it was necessary to read prayers over the coffins ranged outside. The population probably fell by up to 40 per cent, perhaps to around 50,000. It was to be over two centuries before it returned to its pre-1348 level, the region later being ravaged by repeated bouts of the pneumonic variety of the plague.

By the fifteenth century, Aleppo began to emerge as a more significant centre of power in Syria. This partly reflected the burgeoning eastern trade for which Aleppo became a favoured entrepôt as the main exchanges were with the Ilkhans' realm

to the north-east. Crusaders from Cyprus attacked Alexandria in 1365, attempting to revive the crusading spirit but they only briefly interrupted these commercial exchanges. The comparative decline of Damascus was matched by its decreasing importance as a centre of religious and intellectual life by the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Damascus *intra muros* has no surviving projects from the 1360s and 1370s, when building activity concentrated on the Midan quarter and on embellishments to the route of the pilgrimage; recognition, perhaps, of the consolations of faith after troubled times. Some projects from this period survive along Midan Street including the Mosque of Manjak whose patron, Ibrahim ibn Manjak al-Yusufi (governor of Damascus 1357 and 1368–1373), did much to restore order to the city and took pride in its appearance. Almost contemporary (1366) is the Madrasa Rashidiye, a combined *madrasa*-tomb, of the familiar twin-domed central corridor type, its entrance now jammed into an opening between commercial premises just west of Midan Street.⁶²

Burji Mamluks (1382–1516)

It is usual to break the Mamluk era in 1382 and give the subsequent period the label of Burji, a nickname for this second, Circassian, line of Mamluks who had been housed in the tower or *burj* of the Cairo Citadel. Al-Zahir Saif al-Din Barquq (r.1382–1399) emerged at the end of complex fratricidal struggles during which the Circassian Mamluks had played an increasingly dominant role. His rise as strongman, however, failed to resolve the tensions and he was opposed by two powerful *nuwwab*, Saif al-Din Yalbugha and Tamurbugha al-Afdali ('Mintash'). The armies clashed at Shaqhab, 30 kilometres south of Damascus, in October 1389, the first recorded use of gunpowder-based artillery in the Damascus theatre.⁶³ Barquq was victorious but the Damascus Citadel held out. Barquq mounted an attack, concentrated from the south-west against the Bab al-Jabiya, but was routed by Mintash's forces. Barquq eventually managed to install a Cairo-appointed *na'ib*, Yalbugha al-Nasri.

A few building projects serve as a reminder of these troubled times. The 1382–1383 *khanqah* and burial chamber of a high official of Barquq, the Amir Yunus al-Dawadar, once splendidly isolated near Safwat al-Mulk's tomb on the Upper Sharaf, is almost swamped by downtown twentieth century redevelopment along the eastern side of Port Said Street (Map 3). You have to go around to the eastern façade of the Khanqah Yunusiye to find the remains of the splendid gateway and above it on the left the much-restored dome of the burial chamber. The Tomb of Tanibak al-Hasani, on the eastern side of the lower reaches of Midan Street was built in 1396 by Saif al-Din Tanibak al-Hasani, governor of Damascus. In the decade that followed the death of Barquq, he sought to march on Cairo but was halted at Gaza, taken back to Damascus and executed in the Citadel in 1400. At least he was laid to rest alongside his wife in the splendid mausoleum which stands today in its classic Mamluk style just south of the elevated ring road, its beautifully restored bold banding and medallions defying the loss of

its twin domes. We also owe what is probably the most striking of the Damascus city gate façades to this turbulent decade. The outer gate of Nur al-Din's Bab al-Faraj was extensively rebuilt in 1396–1397 and restored again in the 1980s. Its harmonious proportions and bold use of bi-chromal decoration still serve as the north-western entrance to the city.

Siege of Tamerlane (1401)

Years of internecine struggles in Cairo did little to prepare the Empire for its next major external challenge. The siege of Damascus by Tamerlane was the last of the great invasions out of Central Asia. Timur 'Lenk' ('the lame', hence Tamerlane) was a Turk from a trans-Oxus family. Having freed his homeland from the Mongols, Tamerlane developed a thirst for conquest, emulating the example of Genghis Khan but erratically, without the latter's sense of purpose. Tamerlane's rampaging forces arrived in southern Syria via Aleppo, Homs and Ba'albek in late December 1400. His army camped to the west of the city and surveyed it from the slopes of Kassyun at Qubbat Saiyar above Rabwe. Barquq's son, al-Nasr Faraj (r.1399–1412), who had succeeded his father at the age of nine, arrived from Egypt on receiving word of the onslaught and camped at the southern end of the Midan in January 1401. After a drubbing at the hands of Tamerlane's forces, the child sultan promptly withdrew to Cairo on hearing of a possible coup against him, leaving Damascus largely to be defended by its citizens.⁶⁴

Tamerlane offered terms to a delegation of citizens of the city. The citizens agreed to surrender peacefully, Tamerlane having professed willingness to give 'the city of the Companions of the Prophet' its freedom. In Damascus at the time was the great historian, ibn Khaldun, who had accompanied the Egyptian relief expedition from Cairo and stayed on out of apparent fascination for the figure of Tamerlane. Ibn Khaldun slipped out of the city (following Saint Paul's proven method, lowered in a basket from the walls) to pursue debate with Tamerlane, seeking to promote the historian's scheme for a new Islamic empire from the Central Asian steppes to the Atlantic. 'You are the sultan of the universe and the ruler of the world', began ibn Khaldun's account of his opening address to Tamerlane, 'and I do not believe that there has appeared among men from Adam until this epoch a ruler like you'. So successful were the encounters at a philosophical level that they continued over 35 days.⁶⁵

Ibn Khaldun's extraordinary dialogue has been the stuff of many legends but few capture the essentially bizarre encounter between one of history's truly great minds (the author of the *Prolegomena*, a sort of 'prologue to human history') and one of its most profligate mass murderers. The events that occurred towards the end and after these studiously philosophical discussions could not be a greater contrast to the civility and humanity of the encounter. The small garrison left in the Citadel was determined to resist, forcing Tamerlane to prepare a siege of the fortress using massive towers topped by *trebuchets* positioned to the west and north as well as within the Umayyad Mosque courtyard. Tamerlane's king-hit was the undermining

of the great north-west tower of the Citadel by sappers. Its huge structure came crashing down when the mine timbers were set on fire. The small garrison surrendered on 25 February. Tamerlane reverted to form; the resistors were slaughtered and increasingly heavy demands for tribute were imposed on the citizens of the city. These demands finally could not be satisfied and Tamerlane unleashed his unruly forces on the city itself on 16 March 1401, supposedly as revenge for the Umayyads' persecution of 'Ali's followers over seven centuries before.

The civilian city now suffered terrible destruction, perhaps the worst in its history, bringing the end of many of the educational and religious endowments dating back to Zengid and Ayyubid times. As reported by an Italian trader and ex-resident, Bertrando de Mignanelli, who described the city shortly after the catastrophe, Tamerlane gave free rein to forces of destruction that fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah: 'I will kindle a fire inside the walls of Damascus to devour the palaces of Ben-Hadad'.⁶⁶ Tens of thousands of its citizens were killed: butchered in cold blood or incinerated in the Great Mosque. According to an eyewitness account of the Bavarian traveller, Johann Schiltberger, Tamerlane invited the citizens to take refuge in the 'temple'.

Now Tamerlane gave the orders that when the temple was full, the people inside should be shut up in it. This was done. Then wood was placed around the temple and he ordered it to be ignited and they all perished.⁶⁷

When the slaughter, mass rapes and pillage had run their course, the city's craftsmen were rounded up and deported to Samarkand in Central Asia, setting back Damascene industries for at least a generation, if not forever in the case of some skills such as damascening of sword and knife blades. When de Mignanelli reached the still-smouldering city he noted: 'my mind and body were completely shattered by the stench of the corpses and by the great confusion'.⁶⁸ Ibn Khaldun, having avoided these horrors by returning to Cairo immediately after the fall of the Citadel, played down the cruel dimensions his 'sultan of the universe' had revealed. In his autobiographical account he made no mention of the loss of life but reserved his harshest terms for the burning of the Great Mosque: 'an absolutely dastardly and abominable deed'.⁶⁹

The northern walls and towers of the Citadel were hastily restored. The rest of al-Nasr Faraj's governorship, however, allowed little scope for recovery in Syria, even after the Mongols evacuated the area with their booty. His rule was a cruel nadir, sinking to such depths that his *amirs* decided to depose him, the actual murder the work of the sultan's footmen during a banquet in Damascus in 1412. The cumulative effect of plague (return bouts had occurred regularly in the decades after 1350), political uncertainty and a decline in Syria's trading fortunes made a rapid recovery impossible. Egypt and Syria had lost the technological edge that had made them net exporters of industrial products. Moreover, Syria, once a provider of food to Europe, was now an importer of essentials such as olive oil as well as nuts, honey and even raisins. The sugar exports, too, collapsed though trade in cotton resulted in new sources of income.

It was not until 1422 that the empire achieved renewed stability under the rule of Barsbay (r.1422–1438). We owe one important Damascene mosque to this period of renewed activity, the first major project of the post-Mongol period. The Mosque Khalil al-Tawrizi lies south-west of the walled city in the Bab Srije quarter, bordering the route that led south-west from the city towards Dera'a and eventually Palestine (Map 4). It was built by the Grand Chamberlain Khalil al-Tawrizi who died in 1422 before the project could be completed. For the first time, a major Damascus mosque abandoned the dogged adherence to the courtyard–*rivāq* plan and adopted Cairo's preference for a three-aisled prayer hall with only a separate funeral chamber intruding on the plan. The boldly banded façade avoids too many other effects, reserving its emphasis for the tall entrance portal culminating in a shallow canopy which replaces most of the customary *muqarnas* with fan-shaped segments in contrasting stone. The more sober minaret, on the other side of the street, sticks determinedly to the Syrian square-plan tradition. The interior of the mosque is sadly rendered banal by the modern use of high-gloss paint to bring out the inscription bands and the contrasting stonework of the arches, the same exuberant treatment being applied even to the *mihrab*. The *qibla* wall includes important examples of fifteenth century Damascus-produced faience tiles, probably from the same production utilised in restoration work in the prayer hall of the Umayyad Mosque. After a 20-year delay, the neighbouring baths, Hammam al-Tawrizi (still functioning), were opened to provide income to the mosque.

The fact that a program of restoration to remedy the extensive damage resulting from Tamerlane's sacking of the city⁷⁰ did not get underway until 1419 reflected the continuing lack of skilled workmen after Tamerlane's deportations to Samarkand. Another product of this faltering reconstruction process was the Mosque of Qal'i which lies in the zone south of the Mosque which had been particularly badly affected. The small mosque was built in 1431–1432 by the chancellor of Damascus. The minaret stubbornly keeps to the Damascus square plan but adopts the Mamluk signature of the bold circular medallion and a richly embellished *muqarnas* band to mark the transition from square shaft to 12-sided balcony.⁷¹

Other building activity abandoned the crowded streets of the old city and sought fresh space in the Salihiye and Saruja areas north and west of the walls or in Midan Street, still expanding to accommodate the yearly *Hajj*. The death of Barsbay touched off another period of instability, one of the casualties of which was the governor of Damascus (1435–1438), Aynal al-Jaqami, who challenged for the leadership in Cairo when, on Barsbay's death, Jaqmaq (r.1438–1453) took the reins from the infant son, Yusuf. Jaqami besieged the Damascus Citadel but later broke off to meet Jaqmaq's forces south of Damascus. Routed, he fled back towards Damascus but was captured at Harasta and taken to the Citadel. There he was executed and his head sent as a trophy to Cairo where it was carried through the city, brandished on the end of a pike. It is unclear whether the remains of Jaqami were buried in his mausoleum (western side of lower Midan Street) but the building was in the next century converted to a meeting centre for a Sufi mystic society, the Jabawiye (or Sa'diye, hence Zawiya Sa'd al-Din), whose inscriptions

now grace the façade.⁷² A nineteenth century European inhabitant of Damascus, Isabel Burton, recorded a charming ritual that graced the annual *Hajj* procession. The camel carrying the *mahmal* was led up to the window of the *zawiya* whose *sheikh* would feed the animal sugared almond pastries.⁷³

After another bout of instability following Jaqmaq's peaceful death in 1453, the reign of Qai'tbey (r.1468–1498) again achieved continuity, allowing a return to the splendour that the Cairo court had aspired to under al-Nasr Muhammad. While Cairo's economy flourished again, by then the fortunes of Damascus were incapable of effective recovery and in the three decades of Qa'itbey's reign, the sole surviving monument of any note was the minaret he had built (1482–1488) on the south-west tower of the Umayyad Mosque to replace that destroyed during Tamerlane's destructive frenzy. The style of the minaret was a close imitation of Cairene examples, on a scale considerably greater than customary in Damascus. On a building as grand as the Mosque, however, the soaring proportions of the tower, divided into three registers separated by *muqarnas* galleries, takes the massive shaft heaven-wards through the grace and lightness of its tapering silhouette. The rest of the handful of buildings from the reign of Qa'itbey in no way match the extraordinary scale of his Cairo endowments but a modest example is still tucked away in the backstreets south of the western end of Straight Street: the Madrasa al-Haidariye (1473–1474) honouring the *qadi*, Qutb al-Din Muhammad al-Haidari, badly neglected until its 1990s restoration.

A Venetian window

The Venetian presence in Damascus was now at its zenith. We owe to a visitor to the late Mamluk governor's court the first accurate glimpse of Damascene life to have passed into the visual heritage of western Europe: a painting in the collection of the Louvre (also found in two other versions in private collections) depicting a scene of Damascus courtly life. The identification of the scene in the 1940s was the work of Jean Sauvaget, who was the first to spot that the Louvre painting, loosely attributed to the hand or school of the Venetian artist Gentile Bellini, depicted not Cairo or Alexandria but was a detailed presentation of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus seen from the south. The unknown artist (there is no evidence that it was Gentile Bellini) possibly visited Damascus: the scene is certainly strikingly accurate in its depiction of architecture and costume, sufficient to allow confident dating. The painting depicts Qa'itbey's new minaret of 1488 (just described) and must have been completed by 1499, the latest date at which the painting is attested in Venice.⁷⁴

The occasion is probably the reception of a Venetian delegation by the Mamluk governor of the city. Sauvaget assumed that the scene was depicted from the vantage point of the Venetian *fondaco* or factory. He believed that remains of a characteristically Venetian structure survived until the French Mandate period on the southern side of Straight Street, just east of the point where it meets the Bazuriye Suq.⁷⁵ The reception took place on the site now occupied by the 'Azem

Palace replacing an earlier palace used by Mamluk city governors and associated with the city's rulers as far back as Umayyad times and possibly earlier. This would later be developed as the grand palace of the Ottoman governor, Asa'd al-'Azem.⁷⁶ The painting provides a superb 'snapshot' of the elaborate court ritual and flamboyant costumes of the period.⁷⁷ European artists were just beginning to explore the visual richness of the Arab world, centuries before the 'orientalist' craze of the nineteenth century. Lacking any religious or political 'message', the painting's rich depiction of oriental costume and architecture was sufficiently novel to have spawned a range of imitators. We see in this rather stilted composition a first window into the mysteries of the East, done in a matter-of-fact style with the Venetians looking rather perplexed by the extraordinary panoply that surrounded them: vivid costumes; elaborate headdresses, carefully coded by style, colour and fabric, exotic animals and foliage – all set against the minarets and domes of the Damascus skyline rendered in vivid detail.

Collapse

The scene is all the more interesting in capturing a world that had never fully regained its vigour since the last Mongol invasion, in effect teetering on the point of collapse. The end of Qa'itbey's rule brought another period of multiple successors and instability. The reign of Qansuh al-Ghuri (r.1501–1516), who came to the throne aged over 60, sought a new stability and pursued the encouragement of the arts including architecture. Few of his achievements, however, rubbed off on Damascus where we have only one major building project from his reign, the Madrasa Siba'iye which stands just outside the south-western corner of the old city along the road that continues south to become Midan Street. Built by the penultimate Mamluk governor of Damascus, Siba'i, it has either been roundly criticised for its debasement of the Mamluk repertoire or commended as a late flowering of same. The observer these days who braves the torrent of traffic passing the combined *madrasa-zawiya*-mausoleum is faced with a long façade of relentless banding relieved by few vertical features beyond the stubby minaret perched at one end. Even its defender, Meinecke, acknowledged that the building in its repetition of formulae suffered from the dispersal of Damascene craftsmen throughout the Empire.⁷⁸

Qansuh al-Ghuri met his end in a valiant struggle to turn back the Ottoman Turks who had been lapping at Syria's northern borders for decades. He paused in his march north from Cairo to spend a week with Sibai in Damascus. Sibai

despite his misgivings over the prospects of al-Ghuri's campaign . . . extended all the courtesies befitting his sovereign's status. He ordered a silk tapestry laid along the procession route and carried the parasol and bird over al-Ghuri's head as he traversed the town.⁷⁹

Siba'i, grateful for Qansuh's tolerance of the effective autonomy the governor enjoyed in Damascus, agreed to join the hopeless cause. In 1516 at Marj Dabiq,

north of Aleppo, the 78-year old sultan fought to the final coda of the debacle. The Ottoman forces were found superior in every way, not least in their artillery.⁸⁰

Suddenly, Qansuh fell victim to a stroke. One side of his body was paralysed and his mouth hung open. He tried to drink some water but fell from his horse. When his officers ran to his aid he was already dead. Soon afterwards, the Ottoman army swept forward over the position. The Sultan's body was never found, and was presumably lost among the heaps of dead on the field.⁸¹

So ended the glory of the Mamluks.

Notes

- 1 Amitai-Preiss 1995: 9.
- 2 Humphreys 1977: 338.
- 3 Humphreys 1977: 351; Amitai-Preiss 1995: 28; Thorau 1992: 67 notes that a garrison was left in the Citadel.
- 4 Humphreys 1977: 353.
- 5 Al-Nasr Yusuf was captured in Sinai by Mongol forces and executed in captivity in Azerbaijan – Irwin 1986: 32.
- 6 Fiey 1985: 178.
- 7 The Christian opportunism in taking advantage of the Mongol presence marked a turning point after the relatively tolerant attitude that had prevailed under Ayyubid leaders. Even during the height of the pressures from the Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem, the Christians had not been identified with the Crusaders' cause. (There was, after all, plentiful evidence of the Crusaders' hostility towards the non-Latin churches.) Sivan notes that while anti-Christian feeling had been on the rise since the Seventh Crusade (1248–1254), the Mongol occupation provided the first real evidence of Christian complicity with Islam's enemies – Sivan 1967a.
- 8 Ziada in Setton 1969b: 746.
- 9 The Ayyubid project for a fortress overlooking the town of Baniyas was undertaken by al-'Aziz Uthman, son of al-Kamil, in 1227 – ironic in view of his father's role the next year in delivering Jerusalem to the Crusaders.
- 10 Irwin 1986: 58; Thorau 1992: 240–243 allow both.
- 11 Maqrizi quoted in Creswell 1969 II: 155; Thorau 1992: 243.
- 12 Flood 1997: 66; Mayer 1956: 71; Meinecke 1971: 74–75; Rabbat 1997–98: 233–234.
- 13 Abu al-Faraj al-Ush 1976: 218.
- 14 Meinecke 1971: 68–69.
- 15 Though not a trace remains of the Damascus palace, its fame influenced the counterpart built by the Mamluks on the Cairo Citadel that survived in recognisable condition until the early nineteenth century. Its beauty and striking dimensions awed western visitors. Only a few fragments remain: some parts of one of the reception rooms have recently been excavated and a part of the *ablaq* stonework supporting the once-spectacular hall overlooking Cairo to the west – Garcin *et al.* 1982: 44.
- 16 Amitai-Preiss 1995: 232–233
- 17 Irwin 1986: 65–66; Northrup 1998: 107.
- 18 Northrup 1998: 112, 121.
- 19 Ziada in Setton 1969b: 754.
- 20 Glubb 1973: 193.
- 21 He was strongly opposed to Sufism and to the promotion of any alternative 'holy places' such as Jerusalem or Damascus as centres of pilgrimage. His influence was carried on in

- the eighteenth century by the Wahhabi movement in Arabia and the Sanussis in Libya in the nineteenth century.
- 22 Ziada in Setton 1969b: 758.
 - 23 One for the Melchites (Orthodox), one for the Jacobites (Monophysites) and perhaps one other – Pouzet 1991: 307.
 - 24 Behrens–Abouseif 1995: 268.
 - 25 Sauvaget 1932a: 13; Ziadeh 1953: 88; Rafeq 1988: 272.
 - 26 The Saruja quarter acquired its name in the fourteenth century from the *amir* Sarim al-Din Saruja al-Muzaffari (d.1373) who built a small *suq* (*suwayqa*) in the area. For a study of the quarter, see 'Abd al-Razzaq Moaz in Philipp and Schaebler 1998: 165–183.
 - 27 Howard 2003: 143.
 - 28 Aleppo under al-Zahir Ghazi signed the first agreement allowing the Venetians to establish a *funduq*, a bath and a church in 1207 – Ziadeh 1953: 139. Al-Ashraf Khalil (r.1290–1293) concluded the first treaty between Cairo and Venice – Haarmann *EI2* 'Khalil'. Aleppo long enjoyed a reputation for being more welcoming to foreigners. Venice was not to have a consul in Damascus until the fifteenth century. Franciscan records indicate a Catalan consul in 1399 who served the needs of the Catalan community as well as pilgrims – *Bibliotheca Bio-Biografica della Terra Santa e dell'Oriente Franciscano* – vol.V 1906: 266. Ziadeh 1964: 63.
 - 29 Milton 2001: 95–96; Wright 1948: 190.
 - 30 Da Poggibonsi 1945: 77.
 - 31 Wright 1848: 294.
 - 32 Wright 1848: 301.
 - 33 Ibn Batuta *Travels* 1325–1354 (Defrémery and Sanguinetti trans.) 1893 I: 186–254.
 - 34 Ziadeh 1953: 97.
 - 35 Quoted in Ziadeh 1964: 43.
 - 36 Ziadeh 1964: 45 – source not given.
 - 37 Ibn Junayr (Broadhurst trans.) 1952: 271.
 - 38 Several of the baths of this era are given an authentic, though sometimes tongue in cheek, treatment in Boggs 2010.
 - 39 More important for the passing of knowledge, now predominantly from east to west, was the translation movement in Europe which gathered many texts from Muslim Spain.
 - 40 Ates 'al-'Arabi' in *EI2*; Asin 1926: 45–54, 263–266; Watt 1972: 79.
 - 41 There is no evidence that Berytus was a major outlet for Syrian exports in the Roman or Byzantine period – see Arnaud 2001–02: 189.
 - 42 Ziadeh 1964: 39.
 - 43 Walker 1999: 213; Behrens–Abouseif 1995: 269.
 - 44 Meinecke 1985a: 165. Meinecke 1992 (two vols) provides a magisterial survey.
 - 45 For example, the southern wall of the Bab al-Barid vestibule; parts of the Barada panel.
 - 46 Ziadeh 1964: 40.
 - 47 Ziadeh 1964: 58.
 - 48 The tomb-*madrasa* was a late work of the architect, Ibrahim ibn Gana'im, already noted as favoured by Baybars whose son was commissioned to complete his father's funeral chamber in the Madrasa Zahiriye. Quote from Herzfeld 1946 III: 61. See also Meinecke 1992 I: 39. DeGeorge 1997: 343, however, believes the stucco decoration was added in the fourteenth century after Ghazan's sack of the city (1300).
 - 49 Hence the modern name for part of this area, al-Qubaybat ('the domes'). See Sauvaget 1932a: 19 – map.
 - 50 Marino 1997: 73–74.
 - 51 Irwin 1986: 121.
 - 52 Quote from Irwin 1986: 107. See also Ashtor 1958: 193. For an excellent recent study of Tenzig's building program, Kenney 2004.
 - 53 Ecohard 1935; Rafeq 1966: 181–182; Sack 1983: 120.
 - 54 Sauvaire 1993: 434.
 - 55 De Thévenot 1687 II: 18.

- 56 Glubb 1973: 224.
- 57 The complex is surveyed in Burgoyne 1987: 273–298.
- 58 Meinecke 1992 I: 111.
- 59 Irwin 1986: 125.
- 60 Ibn Batuta (trans. Defrémery and Sanguinetti) 1893: 229 (present author's translation from French).
- 61 Ibn 'Ali Hajalah – trans. in Dols 1977: 96.
- 62 Meinecke's attribution – 1978: 580. Earlier, Sauvaget (1932b: no. 55) and Gaube (1978: 70, 175) had ascribed this building to a later Governor, Ishiqtamur al-Ashrafi who died in disgrace in 1390, either in Jerusalem or Aleppo.
- 63 Ayalon 1956: 3.
- 64 The Italian traveller, Bertrand de Mignanelli, provides a fascinating account of the siege of the city and its aftermath. Although not directly an eyewitness to all the events, he had joined al-Faraj's army and returned with it to Cairo. He later travelled back to Damascus, however, and compiled an account of Tamerlane's sacking based on eyewitness reports. Fischel 1956 for full English translation.
- 65 Fischel 1967: 44–58.
- 66 Jeremiah 49.27; Fischer 1959: 226.
- 67 Quoted in Le Strange 1890: 273.
- 68 Fischel translation 1956: 230.
- 69 Fischel 1952: 39; Talbi 1973: 14. For a recent reappraisal of the damage, Vigouroux 2012: 123–159.
- 70 The Mosque's tiles were lost in the 1893 fire but some examples, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, may have found their way there when much of the damaged decoration was discarded after 1893. DeGeorge 1997: 346.
- 71 The decoration of black–white *entrelacs* around the medallions is unfinished – DeGeorge 1994a: 348; Meinecke 1992 II: 348.
- 72 In the 1570s the building's interior was substantially rebuilt in the form of two interconnecting domed chambers, but the Mamluk style of decoration was reproduced on the *qibla* wall. For the Jabawiye, see *EI2* under 'Sa'diyya'.
- 73 Bakhit 1982: 181–183; Isabel Burton 1884: 55–56; Peters 1994: 165.
- 74 Mack 2002: 162; Raby 1982: 63. The painting (inv. no. 100, Louis XIV collection) carries the label *Audience d'une ambassade vénétienne à Damas*.
- 75 Sauvaget 1945–46: 9; Wulzinger and Watzinger 1924: 86 (G.5 1).
- 76 While writers have been puzzled that the Venetian envoys would not present themselves to the governor in the Citadel, there may have been some confusion resulting from the frequent appointment of two governors: one for the Citadel; one for the town.
- 77 The Bellini painting is discussed in a number of sources – initially in Sauvaget 1945–46: 6–12; more recently in Raby 1982: 35–65; Brown 1988: 196–207; Mack 2002: 161–163. Raby and Mack accept Sauvaget's assumption that the scene was taken from the vantage point of the Venetian *fondaco* as it includes a dome characteristic of a *hammam* assumed to be Nur al-Din's *hammam* in the Suq al-Bazuriye. The dome, however, is rather perfunctory and may simply form part of a domestic *hammam*. The *fondaco* was also too far to the east to have provided this perspective.
- 78 Meinecke 1992 I: 194.
- 79 Petrie 1898: 221.
- 80 Imber 2002: 47.
- 81 Glubb 1973: 424–425.

14

THE FIRST OTTOMAN CENTURIES (1516–1840)

Even before the Mamluk Empire suffered its resounding defeat at Marj Dabiq, it had lost the underpinnings of its economic viability. The east–west trade that it had tapped was now diverted by the Portuguese discovery of the sea route to India via the Cape of Good Hope in 1498. The Mamluk fleet tried to engage the Portuguese off Bombay in 1508 but the Mamluks' defeat only hastened the end of their mercantile supremacy. The inroads made by the Ottoman army since their first engagement with the Mamluks in Cilicia in 1491 were unstoppable. Marj Dabiq merely confirmed reality. The defection of the Mamluk governor of Aleppo and the death in battle of the penultimate sultan, Qansuh al-Ghuri, removed all pretext for further fight, particularly as the superior Turkish firepower and battle technology made the outcome, in retrospect, inevitable. The victorious Ottoman, Selim I, moved swiftly through Syria and Egypt to seal his conquest.

Why did the Ottomans want Syria? Most immediately, it was perhaps more a question of not wanting it to fall into others' hands, namely the Safavid Persians who would have found the rotting Mamluk realm a tempting next objective. There was too a wish to inherit the heartlands of the Caliphates of the past. Without Syria, and indeed Damascus, the journey to Mecca was an annual lottery. Moreover, Egypt was ripe for the taking and Syria–Palestine lay in the path of that objective. Whatever dreams the Ottomans held, Syria provided the key.

In Damascus, confusion reigned. The Mamluk *amirs* elected the former Mamluk governor of Homs, Janbirdi al-Ghazali, as the new governor but the city was divided between many factions and the Mamluk governor of the Citadel held out for the old regime. The elders stepped in and surrendered the city to Sultan Selim who entered Damascus on 3 October 1516. So relaxed was the new ruler about the takeover that he stopped off at a *hammam* north of the city for a shave and a bath. The *hammam*, originally established in 1295 as the Hammam Hamawi, was rebuilt in the fifteenth century and traded, most appropriately, under the title 'Hammam

al-Sultan'. This has not saved it from the indignity of being used in modern times as a furniture factory, its interior now stripped of decoration and caked with sawdust.

Not only was resistance in the city largely non-existent but in many cases the old administrative cadre proved happy to serve the new overlords. The Ottomans were just another in the long line of non-Arab (as often as not, Turkish) masters of the Arab lands. They too relied on mamluks for their military and administrative class and much of the old tradition, including its architecture, continued. The fact that their seat was now Istanbul, the old capital taken from the Byzantines only 60 years beforehand, and not Cairo, seemed not much more than a detail. The fact too that the controlling army took to assaulting the people of the city, expelling them from their houses and looting their property, was also nothing unusual for the times. When Selim pushed southwards into Palestine, taking Jerusalem and Gaza, he left Ghazali in charge of Damascus on the understanding that his authority would rally the remaining mamluks in southern Syria to the Ottoman cause.

Selim returned to Damascus for the winter of 1517–1518. It was already apparent that he intended to set his mark on the city. He had ordered that a mosque be built next to the tomb of the Sufi mystic, Mohi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi, whose grave we have noted in the earlier history of Salahiye (pages 228–9). The Mosque of Mohi al-Din, erected within the remarkably short period of five months so that the sultan could be present at the event, is pointedly embellished with columns taken from the Mamluk palace south-east of the Citadel. The mosque's street façade, topped by an eight-sided minaret showing no sign of Ottoman influence, stands squarely within the traditions of the late Mamluk period: perhaps not surprising since its architect, Shihab al-Din Ahmad ibn al-'Attar, had in 1508–1513 supervised major works to refortify the Citadel's northern towers for Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri.¹ Opposite the new mosque, to encourage pilgrims and Sufi devotees, Selim also endowed a soup kitchen (*imaret*) and an adjoining *tekkiye* or Sufi monastery.

On Selim's return, al-Ghazali was confirmed as governor of Damascus by the sultan. Ostensibly, Ghazali sought to steer a course between the interests of the Ottomans and those of the citizens of Damascus. Beneath the surface, however, he actively worked against his new masters. On the death of Sultan Selim in 1519, he sought to seize power from the Ottomans and extend his rule to Hama and Aleppo. Unsuccessfully seeking the support of the people of Damascus, he invested himself with the title of caliph. The religious leadership and business interests boycotted his inauguration at the Umayyad Mosque. In January 1521, an Ottoman army despatched from Istanbul put down his rebellion. Three thousand of his remaining supporters were slaughtered in a battle to the east of Berze in February 1521. To announce the news, 1,000 ears along with Ghazali's head were sent to Istanbul. The citizens of Damascus themselves were not spared and large areas of the city and its environs were destroyed.

Military rule

As a result of Ghazali's rebellion, the Ottomans would be more brutal in suppressing manifestations in Damascus of the Mamluk system than had been required

in Cairo. The Ottoman central administration sent to Damascus 1,000 Turkish janissaries, Ottoman forces of non-Arab and preferably Turkish or Central Asian origin, to maintain imperial authority. Syria was organised around a structure that was essentially military, initially given high priority by the central administration to reflect the two major preoccupations of the new rulers: security, particularly against nomad incursions, and the related issue of the *Hajj*. Initially centralised under Damascus, in 1527 Syria was broken up into separate provinces or *wilayat* (Damascus, Homs-Hama, Aleppo, Adana and later Tripoli) to prevent any recurrence of Ghazali's attempt to enlist Aleppo in common cause. The territory of Damascus covered ten *sanjaks* (administrative districts), extending as far south as Jerusalem, the Palestinian coast and Kerak. To ensure the security of the strategic routes (to Cairo via Palestine or to Mecca) new forts were built at the main resting points, for example Quneitra on the Golan, each provided with an imperial garrison. In between, however, control was assigned to local forces under endorsed tribal leaders.

In economic terms, the tables had been turned between Europe and the Middle East by the fifteenth century: the countries of the Middle East had become under-developed compared with those of Christian Europe. While Europe benefited with the rise of the new entrepreneurial class and the development of new technologies, the Middle East had seen its middle class increasingly subordinated to the whims of alien military rulers. In spite of the loss of much of the eastern trade, the Ottomans briefly gave a new lease of life to the Middle East economy but the outcome was increasingly hostage to a new pattern of misrule and oppression.

Part of the problem was the Ottoman taxation system. The Ottomans were meticulous record-keepers and became more and more efficient at raking income from the province. In the first half-century of their rule, revenue doubled. All of the increase went to the imperial coffers rather than to the purse of the local governor.² Much of this had to fund the imperial forces which contended with an increasing incidence of tribally inspired uprisings, some reflecting the Qays-Yamani rivalry going back now for almost 800 years. In the second half-century, however, the population declined, reducing the revenue base. Other problems related to the emergence of local strongmen, for example the Druze *amir* Fakhr al-Din in Lebanon whose ambitions led to his seizing much of the territory around Damascus as far as the central Syrian desert. In 1605, Fakhr al-Din marched into Damascus, looting many of the quarters of the old city. His swashbuckling career lasted another 20 years, leaving 30 fortresses scattered throughout Syria until the sultan sent an expedition to arrest him. He was taken to Istanbul and executed, much to the relief of the citizens of Damascus.

In theory, the Ottoman system was based on a doctrine of a 'circle of equity'. Strong imperial authority brought effective administration but required a large army funded by steady revenues which were a function of people's access to wealth. Everything was interdependent; the ruler, the elite (religious and bureaucratic), merchants and the peasantry. Each of these four main elements of the state had its role and place. In practice, finding the right system to put this philosophy

into effect was an elusive task. Continuity of administration was distrusted lest governors built up a local power base. One hundred and forty eight governors were appointed to Damascus between 1516 and 1757, each on average lasting less than two years, 75 in the seventeenth century alone. Governors were rarely local. Most could only hold their job if they had influence at court. Damascus was a prestigious post (among the 30 provinces it ranked immediately after Anatolia, Rumeli and Egypt) but rarely a stepping-stone to higher office in Istanbul. As much power as possible was reserved to the centre with the vizier responsible for keeping the main local centres of power (the janissaries, the notables and the tribes) at arm's length.

The Hajj

The return of a Turkish dynasty to power in Syria required some new initiative to affirm its right to rule over the largely Arab population of Syria. The Ottomans founded their legitimacy in the upholding of the Sunni world order and the *shari'a*. They constantly sought to emphasise that there was a Sunni alternative to the pressures of the Shi'a represented by the Safavid dynasty of Iran to the east. The emphasis on popular forms of spirituality such as Sufism (as in the Mosque of Mohi al-Din, pages 228–9) was part of it but the key was the promotion of the *Hajj* as the supreme act of piety. The safe passage to the Hijaz became the Ottomans' annual affirmation of legitimacy, though the promotion of other holy centres (as in the project of Suleiman the Magnificent to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem) was not neglected. The acquisition of Syria and the role of the guardianship of the Holy Places meant that the way was now open to many more pilgrims from Asia Minor to make the annual pilgrimage. The Ottomans organised the *Hajj* around two great caravans, one assembled in Cairo, the second in Damascus. The trickle soon became a flood, fed by pilgrims from other new Ottoman lands in Europe or Central Asia. The transit of Syria and the Arabian Desert was a major challenge for the new administration. The issue of relations with the desert tribes was no longer an occasional irritant but a continuing preoccupation and, by the mid-sixteenth century, the tribes were well aware of their bargaining power.

Whereas pilgrims bound for Mecca could cross Asia Minor in relative comfort and security, from Damascus on, their very survival depended on the conditions secured by the Ottoman system. As early as Homs to the north they began to make the precarious passage between that perennial refuge for brigands, the Anti-Lebanon, and the wild steppe to the east. The Ottomans appointed an Amir al-Hajj or pilgrimage commander and put the Bedouin desert *sheikhs* on the payroll to ensure both the security of the towns and the pilgrimage. A permanent force was deployed for a year at a time along the caravan stops. The network of existing or new *khans* or *caravanserais* was systematised with more capacious courtyarded buildings (effectively small forts with cisterns and stock-piled food supplies) one day's journey apart along the route from the Beylan Pass on the edge of Cilicia to southern Jordan. Many still exist, marking the route

pushed further out into the desert as the cooperation of the nomads became better assured. It became a major administrative challenge each year to assemble the required number of camels and provisions for the journey of at least 40 days in each direction. Provisioning the way-stations was in itself a huge operation with stocks required of everything from animal feed to nails for horses' shoes. The cost of the operation was astronomical. Though most of it was borne by individual participants who had to pay a set rate for the outward journey and a higher fee for the more dangerous return leg, the state's responsibilities were heavy, including all the expenses of the escort.

European visitors to Damascus remained infrequent. Those travellers that made it (for example Pierre Belon de Mans in 1547) highlighted the departure of the *Hajj* in their writings, complementing the usual circuit of the sites associated with Saint Paul. The next century the English traveller, Henry Maundrell, during his famous journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem in Easter 1697, spent a short time in Damascus. He gives a vivid account of the cavalcade, described in loving detail and highlighting the colour and pageantry of the scene.

After these horses came the *mahmal*. This is a large pavilion of black silk, pitched upon the back of a very great camel, and spreading its curtains all round the beast down to the ground. The pavilion is adorned at the top with a gold ball, and with gold fringes around about. The camel that carries it wants not also his ornaments of large ropes of beads, fish-shells, fox-tails, and other such fantastical finery hang'd upon his head, neck and legs. All this is design'd for the state of the Alcoran, which is placed with great reverence under the pavilion, where it rides in state both to and from Mecca.³

Perhaps 20,000–30,000 (some years possibly 60,000) pilgrims assembled in Damascus,⁴ swelling the city's population by over 30 per cent. The procession set off in a display of pageantry unequalled at the time and barely rivalled since. The *mahmal*, the palanquin conveying the gift, including the cover for the Prophet's tomb, was accompanied by the Prophet's standard brought out of the Damascus Citadel at the head of the procession. The departure of the leading figures at Bab Allah (Gate of God), today's Maqam Mosque, was the signal for the rest of the pilgrims to set out, though it was usually several days before all the components were brought together at Muzayrib, 12 kilometres north of Dera'a. The escort troops and camels (hired from as far away as Sukne in the Syrian Desert) assembled there and the Damascus merchants made their last attempts to offload their wares on the participants, many of whom would not survive the arduous journey.

The return of the caravan was if anything even more joyous. The pilgrims straggled in first with the official contingent surrounding the *mahmal* several days later. The safe return of the cortège was greeted by a civic reception that included even the Christian leadership of the city. The *Hajj* was not simply a religious phenomenon. Under Ottoman sponsorship it became 'the annual opportunity to demonstrate its temporal authority'⁵ and a major commercial operation. The pilgrims (many of

them doubling as merchants) returned after exchanging goods with others from throughout the Islamic world. They brought back not just the traditional spices, precious stones and the newfangled commodity (see page 271), coffee, but a great variety of cloth including fine fabrics from India.

It should be no surprise that the *Hajj* began to fashion the whole of the Ottoman presence in the city around this extraordinary event. Much of the pilgrimage infrastructure was housed in temporary shelters and the huge crowds involved normally camped out in the then open area of the Midan al-Hasa to the east of Midan Street. There was a steady expansion in the number of markets, bakeries, *caravanse-rais* and religious institutions attracted by the religious and commercial importance of the route. Moreover, many thousands of Damascenes accompanied the pilgrimage not only as security escorts but as a 'guild of conveyors', teams hired by groups of pilgrims to meet their needs for transport, food and logistics.

Midan

The Midan area south of Damascus now became a continuous extension of the city's living space. Provisioning Damascus with basic foodstuffs became a perpetual challenge. In spite of its ready access to agricultural areas, the demands of the *Hajj* and the vagaries of rainfall in some of the grain-producing areas could result in shortages that were exacerbated by hoarding and profiteering, some of it engineered by the Ottoman rulers. The Midan extension became a major grain storage area and to this day the large storerooms (*bawa'ik*) erected to receive the grain of the Hauran and provision the caravan can be seen along Midan Street.

In the first three Ottoman centuries, the expansion of suburban Damascus accelerated with a new vigour. The extra-mural space that had totaled 64 hectares in 1516 would climb to 184 hectares by the mid-nineteenth century.⁶ Immediately south of the city walls, the Saghir quarter spread into the spaces left by the cemetery. As the Midan expanded to become more than a straggling single thoroughfare, the northern and western suburbs (Saruja, Suwayqa, 'Uqaybe) began to fill in the spaces either side of the route to Salihiye. The expansion of the Midan swallowed along the way the Mamluk hippodrome and the mortuary domes of Qubaybat. Some parts of these extensions seem to have been based on orthogonal principles, for example a section of the Upper Midan quarter west of the main street where the alignment of the lots (datable to the mid-eighteenth century) respects a regular plan, perhaps at the initiative of a private developer or foundation.

These extra-mural extensions were now considerably more extensive than the old city itself. They did little to give the city a more coherent shape and only marginally tidied up the six-kilometre-long silhouette the city had acquired since the Middle Ages. Only the eastern side of the city failed to draw new suburbs, perhaps because a branch of the river made the low-lying area too soggy and because it became the location for 'heavy' industries such as glass and pottery works. Other noisome activities such as dye and tannery works were located along the north-eastern stretch of the Barada, downstream from the city's main population.

Stability of population

Ottoman rule initially brought a reprieve from wars and constant unrest. While prosperity did not necessarily follow, the population stabilised after years of decline. At 52,000 it began the sixteenth century still well short of the 80,000 level probably reached before the great plague 200 years beforehand (page 255). It grew haltingly over the course of the century, perhaps even declining again towards the end. Growing insecurity and the inroads of taxation took their toll. Pascual has analysed the census records and proposed a figure of around 57,000 maximum for Damascus at the end of the sixteenth century.⁷

Specific data on the ethnic and religious composition of the population become available with the Ottomans. The number of Christians appears to have risen during the sixteenth century, perhaps because of emigration from the countryside, giving 12 per cent Christians and 6 per cent Jews in Damascus. As Christians began to play an increasingly prominent role as intermediaries between the European trading presence and the local merchants, the community became more prosperous. At the same time, contacts with western Christendom became more active. (The first printing press in the Middle East, for example, had been introduced in 1610 at the Lebanese monastery of Qazhayé.) While Aleppo profited more immediately from the new contacts, Damascus too haltingly increased its contact with the Mediterranean world. A few western religious orders began to establish their presence in Damascus (Cappucins and, from the seventeenth century, the Jesuits; the Franciscans had already been given permission) and through schools and other forms of proselytising the church sought to affiliate significant elements of the eastern churches to the Catholic fold.

The Jewish community was perhaps slower to profit from these links. The expulsion of Jews from Spain (1492–1496) resulted in a renewal of the communities in many Mediterranean regions including, after 1517, Syria. Since the Middle Ages, their traditional roles had included metalworking and banking or currency exchange. They played a lesser role than the Christians in international trade but were more often employed in senior financial positions in the Ottoman administration. The French traveller d'Arvieux visited their community at Jobar on the north-eastern outskirts of Damascus in 1660 and found a village entirely Jewish in population. The synagogue had been built (probably before Ottoman times) above a cave associated with the legend of the Prophet Elijah who had hidden himself to escape the persecution of Jezebel (see page 25).⁸

The administration of the city superficially echoed Mamluk structures but the machineries were often quite different. At the head of the administration in each *wilayat* was the governor or *wali*. Under Damascus were ten or eleven *sanjaks* including Sidon (until 1660), Jerusalem and much of Palestine.⁹ Invariably for most of the first 150 years the *wali* was appointed from a central administrative service whose ethnic background reflected all corners of the empire but whose ethos was essentially Turkish. The institution of the chief religious figure, the *qadi*, continued but he now was invariably drawn from the Hanafi school, the *madhhab* favoured by

Istanbul. (Only Hanafi clerics were on the state payroll.) His duties were so wide that they strayed close to many areas supervised by the *wali*, for example the provision of food supplies to the *Hajj*, the supervision of weights and measures, and public ethics. The courts, which under the Mamluks had comprised separate jurisdictions for each of the four main Sunni schools, now operated under the supervision of the Hanafi *qadi*. Though Damascus remained a centre of Islamic scholarship, much of it still probably under local direction as the number of Ottoman appointees to religious office remained limited, it was probably not wise to stray too far from the guidelines established by the Mufti of Istanbul.

One notable development in sixteenth-century Damascus, which would shape the culture of the coming centuries, was the introduction of coffee from the Yemen. Initially seen by the Ottoman authorities as a suspect beverage whose popularity was to be discouraged, even banned, it quickly became widespread. The first coffee houses began to appear in the first half of the sixteenth century. It was not long before the first closure orders were brought in, partly stimulated by the fear that the coffee houses would become centres for disreputable practices. (Wine houses, of course, had long been suspect in this regard.) By the early seventeenth century, however, the trend that began in Damascus was unstoppable. The first recorded coffee houses, including those positioned on the riverbanks outside Bab al-Salaam, began operating on a surprisingly large scale with places for hundreds of clients. In 1697, Maundrell was astonished by the size of this novel facility with two areas for the reception of visitors, offering both summer and winter protection, located on an island 'wash'd all round with a large swift stream and shaded over head with matts and trees'.¹⁰ Another voyager, Jean de Thévenot, a few decades earlier, had been particularly struck by 'the smell of flowers (which) delights at the same time several senses and gives a great deal of agreeableness to a situation otherwise so advantageous'.¹¹ One of the early houses, the Café Nawfara, still operates after hundreds of years, its patrons relaxing over their coffee and *narghile* under the towering remains of the eastern gateway to the Temple of Jupiter.¹²

Reshaping Damascus

On the whole, the Ottoman central authorities were not lavish sponsors of buildings in the Arab world. The rate of construction was much smaller than the rash of building under Nur al-Din or the Ayyubids. Many of the projects undertaken were on the initiative of local governors and not the central government. In the first 40 years after the Ottoman conquest, the style of projects in Damascus remained within the late Mamluk tradition. A small-scale example is the tomb now identified as that of Ahmad Pasha, a brother of a Grand Vizier of Istanbul, along the western edge of the Saghir Cemetery. The first experiment, influenced by the Ottoman Istanbul style of centralised dome, was realised on a small scale at the Mosque al-Samadiye (1527), a private project for the Qadriya order of Sufis, just inside the Bab al-Saghir. The attempt to construct an Ottoman central dome



FIGURE 14.1 Tomb of Ahmad Pasha, *muqarnas* canopy

Source: photo by M. Greenhalgh

with Damascus techniques was an uneasy compromise. ‘The inner space of the mosque appears to be a gigantic Mamluk *turba*’, notes Stefan Weber.¹³

By the mid-sixteenth century, the pace had quickened, reflecting a more ambitious taste under Suleiman the Magnificent (r.1520–1566) for major imperial projects intended to mark the role of Damascus in establishing Ottoman religious credentials. The landmark building in Damascus (1554) was the dervish monastery erected on the eastern edge of the old Midan al-Akhdar. It bordered the open area north of the Midan that had long served as the original assembly point before the *Hajj* embarked along Midan Street to its final ceremonies at the Mosque al-Qadem. The Tekkiye was the first of the major Ottoman projects to adopt a more distinctly ‘metropolitan’ Istanbul style with its preferences for simple combinations of semicircular domes, cubic shapes and offsetting pencil-thin minarets. The Tekkiye was essentially an imperial project intended to signal the Ottoman role in assuring the safe passage of the *Hajj*. It also promoted the cause of the Sufi mystics. The Tekkiye, or dervish monastery, was thus a symbolic affirmation of the Turks’ benevolent supremacy, reflecting the Ottoman style by now largely uniform throughout the Empire from the Balkans to Egypt. This major project was entrusted to the imperial chief architect (*mimar*), Sinan ibn ‘Abd al-Mannan (1489–1588), whose studio supervised the work of a local overseer and craftsmen. The latter probably took the initiative and blended in elements of the Syria repertoire: the extensive courtyard, the contrasting *ablaq* stonework, the inlaid plaster decoration of the *riwaqs*.

In his grand new project for Damascus, Mimar Sinan was careful to acknowledge the local decorative tradition while respecting the Istanbul concept of a square-courtyarded mosque, flattened central dome with cascading supporting shapes, symmetrical layout of the students' rooms with their slightly phantasmagoric Turkish chimneys. Recognising the local idiom, he used Syrian craftsmen to embellish the building with *ablaq* and incrustated stone (often only paste-work imitating inlay). Slightly later, another imported architect supervised the Madrasa Selimiye (1566) lying to the east with a connecting *suq*, now the handicrafts *suq*. The second *madrasa*'s local references harked back to the taller Mamluk dome supported on octagonal drum and again used Damascene forms of decoration: interlaced ribbons and striped keystones. However, the overall scale of the projects and their spacious regular layout reflecting the imperial influence of Istanbul brought to an end the more improvised Mamluk practices.

The first major imperial project in Salahiye since the Mohi al-Din Mosque was the rebuilding after a fire of the *imaret* and monastery lying opposite. Like the mosque, the complex was originally erected by Selim I (pages 228–9). Shortly after the Tekkiye was commissioned, the reconstruction of the Salahiye complex was apparently also assigned in 1556 to Mimar Sinan.¹⁴ The remains of the 1518 building formed the first few courses of the new structure, accounting for the abandonment of the contrasting stonework as the façade rises in a plainer style. Two interconnecting domed rooms form the interior of the *imaret*. (Remarkably, the *imaret* still functions for its original purpose, having recently been refurbished and equipped with the latest food preparation equipment.)



FIGURE 14.2 Tekkiye, courtyard

State-sponsored projects were not, however, initiated in later centuries when Istanbul found itself too distracted by the multitude of the Empire's problems. Tribal uprisings and pressing challenges in Europe caused Syria to fall rapidly down the scale of priorities once the pilgrimage had been attended to each year.

Given that the population of Damascus began to rise from the late sixteenth century, reaching perhaps 65,000 by the end of the following century,¹⁵ it is not surprising that the Ottomans continued to turn to the zone outside the traditional walls to house other new institutions. The Ottoman *seraya* (governor's headquarters) was located just outside Bab al-Nasr (the gate that once stood at the western end of the Suq al-Himidiye) and the janissaries found accommodation in the 'Amara and Saruja quarters adjacent to the Citadel. The road that goes directly south from the south-west corner of the Citadel now became a sort of imperial zone. Just as the Roman and Umayyad institutions had clustered around the southern walls of the Temple-Mosque, the Ottomans developed their new axis along the Suq al-Sinaniye leading into Midan Street, thus reinforcing a continuous link between the city and the pilgrimage zone. The process was well underway by the mid-sixteenth century with the mosque built by the Bosnian governor, Lala Mustafa Pasha (r.1563–1567), 'the illustrious general and administrator – a man of thought and action and initiator of many good works'.¹⁶ Regrettably this good work was torn down in a street widening exercise in the early twentieth century.¹⁷ One stretch of the Sinaniye Suq was roofed by a high-ridged structure that impressed the French visitor, de Thévenot, in the mid-seventeenth century. Its 'great stone arches', however, were replaced in the early twentieth century by the more prosaic corrugated iron arched canopy seen today.¹⁸ Near the southern limit of this quarter was the mosque constructed by Murad Pasha whose governorship (r.1568–1569) lasted only long enough for him to initiate the project. The mosque-mausoleum continues many Mamluk decorative elements though the complex plan of a domed prayer hall and an arcaded courtyard, oriented to fit an awkward site, reflects Istanbul. Once again, the institution encouraged Sufi associations, dedicated to the Naqshbandi order of dervishes.

Perhaps the most seminal of these surviving Ottoman projects is the Mosque of Darwish Pasha (r.1571–1573), 125 metres north of the western end of Straight Street. This complex of 1571–1574 shows the Mamluk style still strongly reflected in the banded façade with its portal topped by a minaret. The rather flattened dome of the prayer hall and the pencil form of the minaret (albeit rather stubby) acknowledge the new trends. The founder's tomb, completed around 1579 is separated from the mosque but linked across the laneway. The mosque of another governor, Sinan Pasha (r.1588–1589: Albanian, former commander of the imperial army) equally shows the mixture of styles. Not completed until 1591, it is situated at the western mouth of Straight Street. Its uncompromising use of banding for the façade is slightly softened by a green-enameled minaret in the pencil style, topped by a Turkish candle-snuffer and a raised dome. Its lovely courtyard still offers refuge to visitors with its local vocabulary of arcading and twisted-fluted columns. The prayer chamber is in the Turkish style.

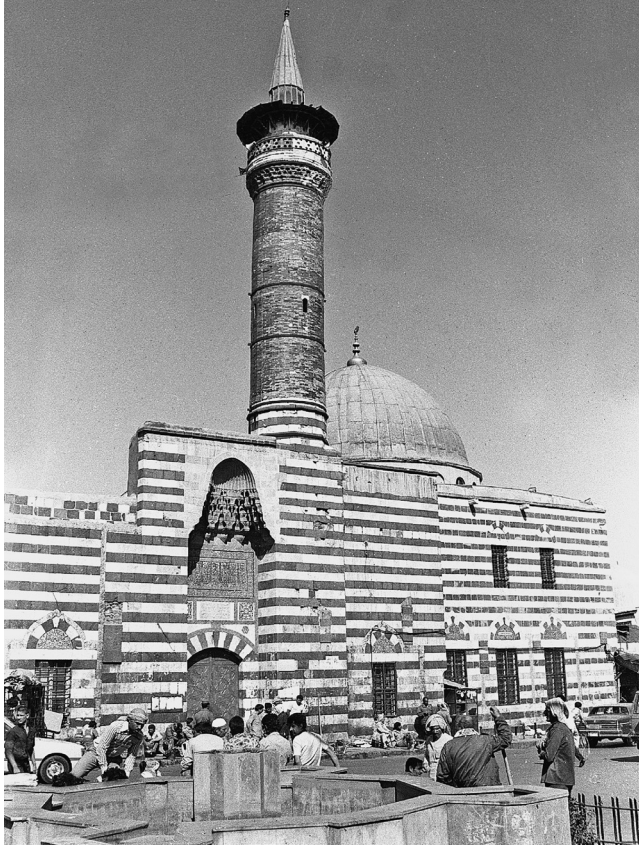


FIGURE 14.3 Mosque of Sinan Pasha, façade

Other early Ottoman projects introduced the proliferation of commercial buildings that were to mark the Ottoman presence for the next 300 years. Planned precincts for the storage and sale of goods, these *khans* or *caravanserais* were stonebuilt complexes, the idea for which may originally have come from Anatolia though, as we have seen, examples existed in Ayyubid–Mamluk Damascus. Reflecting the new orientation of the city towards the south-west, these commercial buildings tended to cluster in the eight-hectare space, still largely reflecting the grid of the Roman ‘new town’, lying south and west of the Umayyad Mosque. Often replacing private houses, 17 *suqs* and 27 *khans* were to be located in this area, by far the largest concentration in the city.¹⁹ The comparative size of the retail sector with a total of 44 commercial complexes was dwarfed, however, by Cairo’s 145 and well below Aleppo’s 77.²⁰ Aleppo also exceeded Damascus in the total number of *khans* (Aleppo c.100; Damascus 57), largely an indicator of the level of wholesale trade. The prestige residential area were nudged out towards the quarters east and north of the Mosque or to the west and north-west of the city walls.

The first surviving example of an Ottoman *khan*, the Khan al-Juhiye (1555–1556), its twin domes unfortunately collapsed, lies on the eastern side of the Suq al-Hayyetin a little south of Nur al-Din's tomb. This area was regenerated after fires had destroyed many structures in 1524. A little later, Darwish Pasha commissioned the Khan al-Harir ('silk *khan*', 1573), still standing 75 metres south-west of the Umayyad Mosque. Its façade employs the Mamluk decorative bands and medallions. As Stefan Weber has observed: 'The Ottoman structure of buildings is interpreted, and then covered with local forms of decoration which changed under the influence of Ottoman principles'.²¹

The vocabulary was now set for the local Ottoman style through to the eighteenth century. The same year, Darwish initiated his last project in Damascus, the Hamman al-Qishani (immediately north of the Khan al-Harir), whose changing room was converted in 1906 to serve, as it still does, as a *suq*. A more traditional open-courtyard *khan* with shops on the ground floor survives in the Khan al-Zait (1601–1602), 200 metres south on Straight Street with its 20 domes and beautiful arcading intact.

Damascus had begun vaulting some of the *khans*' courtyards with domes, a practice originally confined to fully enclosed spaces used for valuable commodities (*bedestans*). The vaulting of the first *bedestan*, the Suq al-Sibahiye (1554–1556), has survived despite much subsequent rebuilding in the Suq al-Arwam near the western end of the present-day Suq al-Hamidiye. The destruction of the Mamluk administrative palace and courts of justice, whose remains were partly used in the building of the Mohi al-Din Mosque (pages 228–9), freed this space. The grandest of the surviving *bedestans* is the Khan Murad Pasha, built in 1608 with 66 shops and 40 depots following an L-shaped footprint covered by six domes. It was adapted in the nineteenth century to serve as the 'customs *suq*' (hence its modern name, Khan al-Jumruk), just a little north of the Khan al-Harir on the western side of the Suq al-Haramain.²²

The seventeenth century was not a prolific period for new building initiatives. Few new mosques were initiated, a rare surviving exception being the Mosque al-Qari (c.1650) whose minaret with its *muqarnas*-supported gallery graces a street corner east of the Umayyad Mosque (minaret rebuilt 1697–1698). The mosque was built through the beneficence of the Safarjanis, the wealthiest merchant family of the time in Damascus who held important interests in this part of the city and were devotees of the Khalwati order of Sufis.²³ A century later, the same family built a second mosque which still bears their name, a further 50 metres to the east. Its corner minaret was built in a more severely plain style.

Municipal services

The landscape of the city remained a jigsaw puzzle of alleys and impasses running between the surviving thoroughfares largely following the Roman grid. Quarters that clustered around a group of streets that could be locked behind gates at night remained the norm.²⁴ In commercial areas, the streetscape was partly governed by

the regulations on the use of public space and partly self-administered by the guilds, each one supervising a market area specialising in a particular craft or trade. The system did not require heavy intervention by the Ottoman authorities but it would be inaccurate to describe it as barely regulated chaos.

Ottoman times provide the first real glimpses of how Damascus was organised from the point of view of its government services, its legal apparatus and the provisioning of the city with food.²⁵ Street cleaning and lighting were provided and the Roman water reticulation system survived more or less intact. The Ottomans only had to continue the existing systems for the allocation and charging for water both in the city and, through the irrigation flow regulators, to the neighbouring agricultural areas. There were constant instructions from the authorities for houses to be painted and the city's streets began to be paved from the seventeenth century. Extra-mural routes were upgraded too. Tariq Sultani (Midan Street) was paved in 1635 and the route to Salhiye in 1675.

The gulf in terms of standard of living between Damascus and its surrounding countryside was vast, though it was often bridged by intermarriage, by sending children to towns for their schooling and through commerce. The hinterland of Damascus lacked the urban centres that had marked the late classical landscape. Outlying towns such as Ba'albek or Suweida had dwindled to mere villages. Only Quneitra of the inland satellite centres earned the description of 'town' in travellers' accounts.²⁶ Beirut had declined after 1630 and Sidon was the second town of the region. Damascus, though itself still struggling to overcome the centuries of disease and disruption, was the pole of attraction and market for the region. Food supplies were drawn from a variety of sources including as far afield as the Hula Valley (rice), the Hauran (grain), the plain north to Hama (sheep meat and milk products) and the Beqa'a (grapes, olive wood for combustion), as well as the Ghouta (fruit and vegetables). Most fresh produce was sold outside the walls, the intra-mural *khans* being reserved for the more lucrative international trade, precious items and manufactures. The supply of snow, brought in winter and summer from the higher reaches of the Anti-Lebanon via the village of Mnin which fiercely guarded the monopoly, remained a lucrative earner.

The French nobleman, the *chevalier* Laurent d'Arvieux, visited Damascus in 1660 from his base with the French merchant colony in Sidon. His description of the inland city is enthusiastic, in contrast to many of his impressions of the other cities of Syria. Adopting Turkish dress and speaking Arabic he was able to use his contacts to gain entry to most major buildings of the city. His visit included the Citadel whose inner chambers he describes, including a 'Great Council Chamber'. He had to content himself with a view of the Umayyad Mosque from a neighbouring building and marvelled at its dimensions, its gleaming marble-paved courtyard and 'its mosaic-decorated walls ornamented in gold and azure'. ('What a pity that I was unable to enter, to savour and describe its beauty at my leisure'.) He was favourably impressed with the city's well-built *khans*, by its wide variety of goods and the provision of footpaths for pedestrians. The standard of housing he found high; well maintained and painted, with a fountain in every courtyard.²⁷

His familiarity with Syria no doubt accounts for his favourable picture of the Damascenes with whom he clearly felt at home.

The people are generally handsome, pale skinned and generous . . . There is a certain sense of grandeur and even of liberty in the town that is not found in others. Whatever race or religion, they take pride in being well dressed, comfortably housed with good furnishings and set much store by their liberty. All subjects of the Great Pasha, they nevertheless do not submit to subservience and let the *pashas* know it if they are harshly or despotically treated.²⁸

The likelihood that the city retained more of its ancient past than it does now is indicated by d'Arvieux's description of a tall commemorative column towards the western end of Straight Street next to which stood a fountain: possibly part of the *tetrapylon* arrangement of which only one pedestal, now supporting the minaret Ma'danat al-Shahm, remains (see page 74). The first signs of a more sceptical approach to popular claims regarding the city's monuments appear in his description of the Chapel of Saint Ananias: 'I could not see by what necessity Paul had to be given instruction in a cave'.²⁹ Maundrell's description (1697) is less enthusiastic about the standard of building, noting adversely the widespread use of mud and timber construction and the contrast with marbled portals. 'It is an object not a little surprising, to see mud and marble, state and sordidness, so mingled together'.³⁰

A new role (1708–1758)

By the end of the seventeenth century, Ottoman power was on the decline, the turning point marked by the Treaty of Carlowitz that ended the Ottomans' ambitions in central Europe. The imperial system now concentrated on the essentials of its role, of which the *Hajj* remained a vital element protecting the sultan's legitimacy. Damascus could not be allowed to slip into decay and anarchy. The organisation of the pilgrimage began to dominate all aspects of the province's activities. Not only were the resources of Damascus itself called on to assemble and provision the pilgrimage train but by a decree of 1708 the command of the *Hajj* was taken out of the hands of local notables who had used tax farmers to collect the necessary revenues in the region around Damascus. The governor of Damascus was now appointed Amir al-Hajj and allowed to raise the finances by directly taxing the *sanjaks* of Tripoli, Sidon and Jerusalem. He made an annual tour of those districts to levy the necessary funds and made more enduring financial arrangements with the Bedouin. Nasuh Pasha, a respected and effective imperial official, celebrated for his 'severity and daring', served first in the combined role of governor of Damascus and Amir al-Hajj.³¹ The experiment was a great success and Nasuh's authority grew as the prestige of the *Hajj* enhanced the sultan's religious aura. In return for their funding, the contributing provinces gained some benefits, namely exemption from having to contribute troops to imperial wars. The operation was closely monitored by the sultan's staff (the Porte), who, always suspicious

of such outright success, was receiving reports by 1713 of unbridled authoritarianism on the governor's part. His replacement was chosen and secretly sent with a force of 15,000 to execute Nasuh, who managed to flee to Jaffa in Palestine where an unfortunate encounter with a tree branch dislodged him from his horse. He was cut down by his unforgiving successor's troops.

There were great fluctuations in the fortunes of the coastal and interior cities of the Arab Ottoman provinces. Until the nineteenth century, none of the ports (or the inland cities that fed them with goods) was dominant and trade flows moved with political fortunes. After the setback resulting from the Portuguese opening of the sea route to India in 1498, Aleppo had become dominant in the eastern trade by the seventeenth century, partly because the goods now purchased (raw materials for European crafts and industries, not the finished products of previous centuries) favoured Aleppo, which was closer to the sources of silk and cotton.

Even Aleppo's trade, however, would eventually decline as routes via Anatolia leading to the flourishing port of Smyrna (Izmir) were preferred. Until Alexandretta was developed in the seventeenth century, Aleppo shared with Damascus the lack of a natural port capable of expansion to match burgeoning trade flows but it benefited for a time from the city's more open attitude to European trading houses with English, Venetian, Genoese and French *funduqs* operating by the sixteenth century. The fact that Aleppo could also serve as an entrepôt for the products of the extensive Anatolian countryside to the north gave it a further advantage over Damascus. The Venetian consulate in Damascus closed in 1545 and, a century later, Pococke found that the Venetian trading colony had largely deserted Damascus for Aleppo, mysteriously attributed to 'some intrigues with Turkish women'.³² In the eighteenth century, French merchants decamped to Acre, driven from Damascus by the level of exactions demanded by the 'Azem governors. This resulted, however, in no diminution of the level of Damascus exports and the city also gained from internal difficulties that weakened Aleppo's dominant role in northern Syrian trade by the eighteenth century. Damascus picked up much of the trade from India via Baghdad and even difficulties with the 'Anaza tribe around Palmyra did not deter the flow.³³ Transport on to the Mediterranean ports continued to follow several routes and it was not until Beirut's rise to total dominance of the coastal trade in the nineteenth century that the issue of the best choice of access to the sea was decided.

By the early eighteenth century Damascus was beginning to come out of its economic and social lethargy. Symptomatic were the signs of population growth as well as new industries. One of the most important Damascus industries at the end of the seventeenth century was the production of potash, exported and used for the making of soap and glass.³⁴ The role of Damascus as an entrepôt diminished when the ports of Acre, Tyre and Sidon became bases for the French representatives formerly installed in Damascus who were now directly supplying the industries of Marseilles. Damascus, however, continued to export its own products (dried fruits, silk, spices and dyestuffs) as well as serving as the transfer point for more exotic Eastern goods traded via the *Hajj*. In turn, Damascus imported more items from Europe, including cloth and a diverse range of manufactured goods.

The situation in the province as a whole was less rosy. The first two Ottoman centuries had seen a persistent tussle between two forms of imperial rule: a highly centralised decision-making system and reliance on locally autonomous governors. The practice of rapid turnover of governors had made it impossible to reconcile the two systems and by the early eighteenth century, the province of Damascus was constantly exposed to tribal inroads into the settled areas and ensuing economic decline. The province only seemed to come to life for the annual *Hajj*. In between, constant tensions with the imperial soldiery, the janissaries, kept the towns in a form of loosely imposed oppression. A new series of reforms in the seventeenth century attempted to tackle this decline. Security was increasingly entrusted to locally raised forces. This, however, in turn led to constant tensions between the local janissaries (*yerliya*) and the governor, requiring fresh imperial forces (*kapikuli*) to maintain order. A series of executions of the local janissary leaders (1659) after a revolt brought the downgrading of the local groups by the end of the seventeenth century.

The Ottoman system had only loosely sought to impose a Turkish identity on its provinces. The number of ethnic Turks in the city was limited; the administrative class, the new *ulama* and the *kapikuli*. 'At heart (the Turks) and their subject always remained strangers to one another'.³⁵ Yet Damascus seemed to have successfully straddled both worlds, Turkish and Arab. André Raymond has remarked that even the Turkish elite felt obliged to record their inscriptions in Arabic rather than Turkish.³⁶ This mixture was hardly a new experience for a city that had long harboured a diverse ethnic mix with elements ranging from Central Asia to the Maghreb. Attempts to impose Istanbul's priorities, such as the Hanafi code of Islam, were rarely pushed to the point of resistance. Clearly, however, the importance of Damascus as a centre of thought declined during the Ottoman centuries. The level of literacy was low and Damascus was further from the epicentre of religious and cultural life compared with its more central status and its relatively easy access to its rulers in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. Nevertheless, the city's religious institutions retained an important role. Raymond has noted that the major mosques were big employers: the *waqf* for the Umayyad Mosque employed 596 persons and even the newly established Mosque of Sinan Pasha included over 200 on the payroll. The *qadi* remained a highly respected figure, outranking even his counterpart in Cairo and retaining important local powers, including supervision of the religious courts, *waqfs* and the guilds.³⁷

'Age of the *a'yan*'

Previously it had been the rotating governors who had sponsored new building projects on the basis of *waqfs* or trusts set up before their inevitable departure for another post. Now, the initiative rested with the *a'yan* (notables), merchant families licensed after 1695 to serve as tax farmers and whose fortunes rose with their Ottoman sponsors. This new class of state-sponsored businessmen resided in Damascus on a more permanent basis. As long as they acknowledged that their

careers could be made or broken in Istanbul, governors could now be selected from the local notables. Moreover, the new leaders reversed the trend of the past two centuries towards an amalgam of local and imperial architectural styles and chose a repertoire that was essentially Syrian. At the same time, the scale of projects became larger, more ambitious in striving to make a statement. The taste now was for schools, palaces and larger-scale *khans* embodying the prestige of trade, not mosques with which the city was already plentifully endowed.

None of the measures introducing a greater localisation was necessarily a solution to the problems of endemic insecurity but, at least in the towns, the rise of local dynasties brought a semblance of stability. The foremost representatives of the new trend were the 'Azem family, who were to hold the governorship of Damascus nine times, covering much of the period 1725 to 1807. Originally from Ma'arat al-Numan in northern Syria, the family's links with Hama and the port city of Tripoli were crucial in their rise to success. Isma'il Pasha al-'Azem was the first to serve as Damascus governor (1725–1730), successfully establishing the right balance between stability and profiteering (notably via his monopoly in the supply of sheep from Hama) that was to be the 'Azem formula. The next governor, a brother-in-law of the sultan, 'Abdullah Pasha Aydinli (1730–1734), was sufficiently wealthy before taking up office to concentrate on the prestige of being the commander of the *Hajj*. The reassertion of imperial authority in Damascus was also not without grave consequences for the unruly military. The locally raised *yerliya*, long hostile to the imperial troops, had their stronghold in the Midan quarter. 'Abdullah directed the imperial forces against the *yerliya* bases in the Midan, subjecting the quarter to destruction and pillage unmatched since Tamerlane's era.

Suleiman Pasha al-'Azem (1734–1738, 1741–1743), the second in the dynasty, embarked on a conciliatory policy designed to win the citizens of Damascus and the 'ulama to his side, though he did nothing to relieve the underlying problems of the city. The extent to which he was complicit in the racketeering that led to ever-escalating prices was made dramatically evident when his goods were seized by the Porte after his death.

As'ad Pasha al-'Azem (1743–1757), the third office holder in the family and the most illustrious, initially came to fame as local official (*mutasarrif*) in Hama. His career continued in Sidon (governor 1741–1742) where the French consul noted his exceptional capacities as organiser. He was called to the most prestigious *wilayat* in Damascus in 1743 on the death of his uncle, Suleiman, to address a crisis resulting from the ambitions of the ruler of Galilee, Zahir al-'Umar (r.1730–1775), which threatened to ruin the launching of the *Hajj*. He quickly toured the neighbouring provinces to raise the necessary revenues and was given control of the *sanjaks* of Jerusalem and Nablus. The *Hajj* was a brilliant success and a relieved Sultan Selim showered him with gifts.

The rivalries and conflicts in the town were endemic and reflected all the faults of a system that teetered between centralised authoritarianism and local autonomy. Istanbul consciously encouraged embedded tensions between local forces. The military forces were split between the governor's troops (usually alien tribesmen)

and the imperial janissaries (both *yerliya* and *kapikuli*). Moreover in 1748, Fathi Effendi al-Falaqinsi, the chief financial official or *daftardar* (hence his popular name, Fathi al-Daftari) had openly used As'ad Pasha's absence to take command of the city. As'ad had started young (39 years on appointment in Damascus) and had to tread cautiously to avoid a showdown with the powerful *daftardar*. The Pasha bided his time and ensured he was armed with a *firman* (decree) from Istanbul asserting his authority. He used forces based on his own supporters and swept down on the insurgents in Midan and Suq Saruja. The dissident *daftardar* sought to pay tribute at the Citadel but was executed before he could draw breath.

Fathi had established a high profile as a monument builder. To him we owe the precariously surviving Hammam Fathi in the Midan quarter and the striking al-Qaimariye Mosque whose courtyard (along the south side of the old axis leading east from the temple) still offers a peaceful haven for students from North Africa.

As'ad's decisive victory and the promise of a long tenure enabled him to reorganise the governor's role on a new basis thus launching his aspirations as a great builder. A solid local administration was set in place using competent officials, including those drawn from the minority communities. The *kapikuli* were rebuilt at the expense of the *yerliya* who had been the basis of the power of rabble-rousers like Fathi. The *yerliya* remained concentrated in the more distant south-western and southern suburbs, especially the Midan, where they found common cause with new immigrants and the underprivileged and from where they could move in on the grain-distribution system. Throughout the seventeenth century, the Ottoman governors had attempted to co-opt the quarter bosses, the *aghawat*, even to the extent of giving them responsibility for the security of the *Hajj* but they could never sufficiently tame them or efface what was becoming a basic rift in Damascene society between the *a'yan* of the old city and the *aghawat* of the periphery.

Cathedrals of commerce

The eighteenth century *a'yan* sought to shape the commercial and religious heart of Damascus as a city within the city. In the words of the modern chronicler of this age of 'patrician cosmopolitanism', Linda Schatkowski Schilcher:

the 'Azems generated a new sense of identity and pride in the city and reinforced a style of life which was held to be typically Damascene . . . [the city] acquired a legacy of monumental stone construction reminiscent of [its] early Islamic and medieval grandeur.³⁸

Some 30 projects of the family were concentrated in the area south-west of the Mosque which came to house the greatest concentration of commercial depots and *suqs*.³⁹ Most function on a commercial basis to this day. Khan al-Sheikh Qatana, Khan al-Ruzz, Khan Fuqani and Khan al-Tutun are examples from the eighteenth century that continue to testify to the vitality of the bazaar economy, even if the fabric of the structures is a little battered from use.

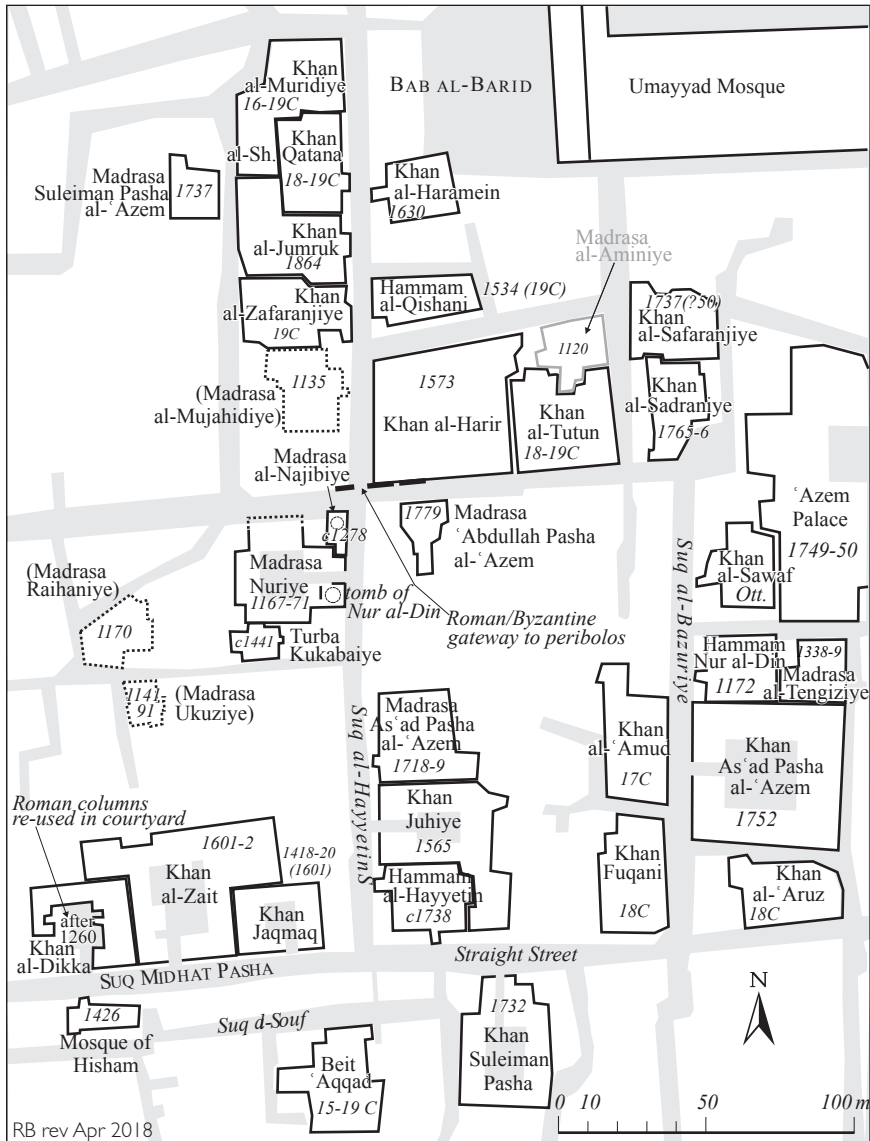


FIGURE 14.4 Cathedrals of commerce

Lying close to the early Ottoman presence west of the city this zone also housed many of the city's religious institutions, some dating from before the Ottoman period, illustrating the close traditional links between Islam and commerce. The area remains a showplace of the rise of the 'Azems and their imprint on the city. Here a brilliant new palace was built on the site long marked by governors' residences since possibly Aramaean times, the last being that built by the Mamluk,



FIGURE 14.5 'Azem Palace, courtyard

Tengiz. The Beit al-'Azem ('Azem Palace) took the combined talents of 800 workmen and all the city's craftsmen over two years to complete. It survives to this day though a severe fire in 1925 gutted much of the southern section (page 322). It 'represented the zenith which As'ad Pasha's prestige had reached'⁴⁰ and established a trend towards splendidly decorated residences which flowed through much of the rest of the Ottoman period in Damascus.

Whatever the fluctuating fortunes of the broader Syrian economy and the gradual slide towards decline elsewhere in the empire, the Damascus merchant class defied the trend and rose to new influence in the city's leadership. The shift of much of the outwards trade flow from northern to southern Syrian routes, examined above, helped boost the city's role. The symbol of the rise of the new merchant class, the Damascus *khan*, whose early development has been noted, now reached its apogee. The growing scale of the *khans* can be traced through the mid-eighteenth century, beginning with the Khan of Suleiman Pasha (1732). It survives somewhat neglected, its central domes collapsed long ago, on the south side of the Suq Midhat Pasha.

The Damascus flair for covering the entire central courtyard with domes reached its most spectacular development in the great eight-domed *khan* of As'ad Pasha al-'Azem, recently restored. 'A perfect example of the Ottoman understanding of space',⁴¹ the *khan* develops the concept of the dome-surrounded courtyard to cathedral-like proportions. The domes soar on four huge pillars, the central space left uncovered above its pendentives, as its planners probably intended. The sun penetrates the courtyard with dramatic effect; the receding volumes around the

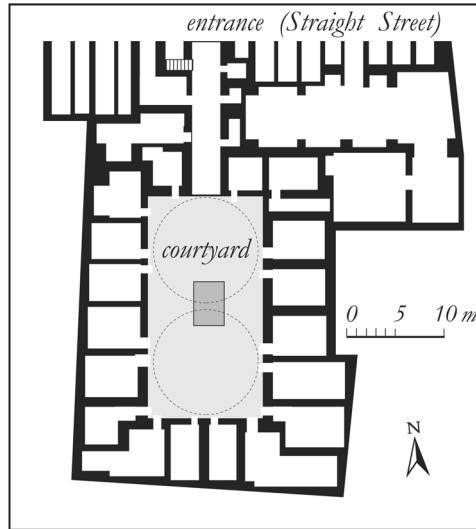


FIGURE 14.6 Khan Suleiman Pasha

Source: plan after Abb. 5 in Mohamed Scharabi 'Der Suq von Damaskus' in *DM* 1983

central 'dome' of pure light almost take the breath away with their play on simple themes of light and shade, repetition of basic shapes and the uncompromising use of traditional Damascus banded masonry. This is the great masterpiece of Ottoman Damascus that even Sinan's rather subdued Tekkiye and certainly As'ad Pasha's own nearby palace cannot rival. As witness to the power of the *a'yans*, it hides magnificently the feet of clay on which their rule was based.

Beneath this monumental surface, As'ad's rule did little to address the ills of the Ottoman system and nothing for the average Damascene, still the victim of speculators and a lawless soldiery, beyond occasional interventions to counter the worst manipulations of the market. At least international trade began to thrive with Damascus again open to caravans from the east and profiting from the French *échelles* or coastal entrepôts that the Ottoman capitulations licensed. Istanbul had become distrustful of the extent of the power network built up by the 'Azem family and as part of its efforts to counter their influence reassigned As'ad Pasha to Aleppo. By releasing all the criminals from prison As'ad ensured that his departure in 1757 would be marked by chaos that would make his successor's job impossible.

Unhappy at his transfer to Aleppo and the possibility of a further move to Cairo, As'ad was also strongly suspected of engineering a prolonged attack on the 1757 *Hajj* as it neared Damascus on its return journey. Stripped of its protecting force, most of the pilgrims were massacred and their goods plundered by Bedouin. Twenty thousand or more died, an event whose shock waves reached throughout the empire. As'ad was accused in Istanbul of seeking to prove that only he deserved the role of Amir al-Hajj. The Porte needed a scapegoat for such a momentous disaster and



FIGURE 14.7 Khan As'ad Pasha, central courtyard

As'ad Pasha was found guilty at least of negligence. He was strangled in an Ankara *hammam* in 1758 and his head taken to Istanbul. It took six months for all his wealth to be prised out of the recesses of the Damascus palace.

The Porte decided to abandon the 'Azem experiment for a while, replacing As'ad al-'Azem with rotating appointees drawn from the imperial service. This did nothing to relieve the city of the constant clashes between local and imported janissary forces. One governor, 'Uthman Pasha al-Kurji (1760–1771), ironically a former mamluk of As'ad Pasha, retained his post for over a decade, managing to restore a degree of stability by easing the burden of taxes on the citizens of the city. An Egyptian invasion of southern Syria in 1771 led by Abu al-Dhahab, mamluk of the Egyptian ruler 'Ali Bey, in collaboration with Zahir al-'Umar (now the strongman of Acre) sought to exploit dissatisfaction with 'Uthman. It resulted in an oddly offhand occupation of the city (but not the Citadel), followed by withdrawal at the prospect that the Porte would not let this intrusion go unanswered. Another decade of 'Azem rule, under Muhammad (son of As'ad, 1771–1772, 1773–1783)

followed. The nearly successful challenge to 'Uthman Pasha, however, had underlined the extent to which the Damascus governorate had lost its wider prestige in the region.

The visit to Damascus in 1786 by the young French voyager Constantin-François Chassebœuf (Comte de Volney), provides us with the first perspective which reflects the European enlightenment, an observer intent on dissecting the city from more than a picturesque viewpoint. Too early to be entranced by the romanticised perspectives of the next century, his picture of the city is often harshly vivid:

One is right to complain that the bleached waters of the Barada are cold and harsh; that the inhabitants of Damascus like to be obstructive; that their pallor resembles the skin of a convalescent rather more than it signals good health; and finally that too much indulgence in fruits, particularly apricots, produces among them each spring and autumn intermittent fevers and dysentery.

Volney followed the well-established routine of observing the *Haji* pilgrimage as it set out and carefully mixes a colourful description with shrewd analysis of the caravan as 'a means of exploitation and a very lucrative form of commerce'.⁴²

Acre's rise – and fall

By the end of the eighteenth century, Damascus had probably crept up again to a population level of 90,000. As we noted earlier, however, it was beginning to lose its dominant position in southern Syria to what had previously been the small port of Acre, a much-diminished version of the splendid headquarters of the thirteenth century Crusader kingdom. The balance between coast and interior was swung by the late-eighteenth-century adventurer, Zahir al-'Umar (d.1775) who, from his base in the Galilee region of Palestine, had spread his influence to Acre and inland to Damascus, his secret of success being his capacity to monopolise the trade in grain, olive oil and cotton from southern Syria and Palestine and channel it towards lucrative markets in Europe. A new strongman, a mamluk from within the Ottoman army, Ahmed Pasha al-Jazzar, further consolidated Acre as his base, making it the dominant outlet for the Syrian trade during a new phase of prosperity that lasted until the 1830s.

A third generation al-'Azem, Muhammad Pasha, held the governorship of Damascus between 1771 and 1783. A successful administrator and great builder, he governed the city at a high point in its prosperity and was responsible for the beautiful little *madrasa* today known as the Madrasa 'Abdullah al-'Azem, just west of the 'Azem Palace. He also rebuilt the market area between the Suq al-Arwam and the Citadel. This new *suq* (literally Suq al-Jadid) followed a west-east alignment and began the redefinition of the western axis leading to the Umayyad Mosque.⁴³

Ahmed Pasha al-Jazzar paid due obeisance to Ottoman sovereignty and harboured the ambition to add the governorship of Damascus to his offices. The Porte resisted giving him the prize and deliberately encouraged a creative tension

between the two centres. To that end, al-Jazzar was given brief appointments to Damascus between 1785 and his death in 1804, though he remained resident in Acre. His rule alternated with the last in the al-‘Azem line, ‘Abdullah Pasha, who held the office three times. A convenient marriage to one of the daughters of Muhammad Pasha reflected only nominal interest by al-Jazzar in a *modus vivendi* with residual ‘Azem interests. A fortuitous economic result of this alliance was the building up of the trade in grain exports to Europe from southern Syria and Palestine that Jazzar funnelled through Acre port. Al-Jazzar’s rule in Damascus was marked by a series of brutal murders of supporters of the ‘Azems, including leading Hanafi clerics. He also enflamed the tensions between the *a’yans* and the peripheral forces of the Midan.

The Porte’s return to a policy of abbreviated appointments reflected a concern to contain issues rather than to confront them and encouraged a renewal of the factionalism that had prevailed in the early part of the eighteenth century. The bloodletting reached an end in 1804 with al-Jazzar’s death and a final settling of scores by ‘Azem supporters. The fragile loyalties of the Ottoman troops employed in various janissary units magnified the level of anarchy. The economy of the southern Syrian region was weakened by these tensions. Damascus, now a secondary force in the game being played out between local mamluks and the Porte, suffered further blows to its standing from the inroads of the extremist Wahhabi uprising in what is now Saudi Arabia. The assertion of Wahhabi supremacy in the Hijaz resulted in serious disturbance to the pilgrimage, which at times between 1807 and 1813 could not be performed under Ottoman auspices. The last of the ‘Azem governors was dismissed from office in 1807 when the *Hajj* failed to make it through to Mecca. The usefulness of the ‘Azem family to Istanbul had clearly passed.

European ambitions – Egypt intervenes

There were, moreover, wider rumblings in the region that were eventually to have their repercussions in Damascus. Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt (1799–1801) brought a new paradigm to the eastern Mediterranean, the first direct linking of the region to the world of western ideas since the unfortunate experience of the Crusades. In Cairo, the old Ottoman policy of containment collapsed. The local strongman, Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha (r.1805–1848), persuaded of the need to bring Egypt into the orbit of post-1789 Europe (of which a glimpse had been experienced during the Napoleonic presence) ended the power of the Cairo mamluks and established Egypt as a virtually autonomous protectorate, adopting the title of Khedive. Muhammad ‘Ali saw in the Wahhabi revolt an opportunity to assert his influence in the region in the face of the evident inability of the Ottoman governors of Damascus to maintain traditional control in the Hijaz.

By the early nineteenth century, the Ottoman system was failing to deliver most of its promises in the Syrian region. A bloody repression of the imperial janissaries in Istanbul in 1826 required a new army to be raised by Sultan Mahmud II (r.1808–1839). In September 1831, the Damascus janissary forces revolted against

the Ottoman governor, Muhammad Selim Pasha, reflecting increasing concern at the Porte's fiscal exactions to fund this new imperial force. Much of the imperial zone of the city was burnt in the clashes between janissaries and forces loyal to the governor. Selim Pasha was besieged in the Citadel by a mob, largely controlled by the Midan gang leaders, for 40 days. He and his entourage were finally promised safe passage but were set upon in the house where they had found refuge and murdered. A revolutionary government was set up led by the Midan *aghawat*.

The Porte moved slowly and indecisively to restore central authority, an expeditionary force not arriving until December. The weakened stature of Damascus was even more evident when Muhammad 'Ali despatched forces from Cairo, occupying Syria six months later (June 1832) without significant resistance from the local Ottoman troops. The Egyptian presence was initially light-handed but resentment grew. A highly centralised Egyptian quasi-protectorate over Syria, headed by Muhammad 'Ali's son, Ibrahim Pasha, was recognised by the Porte in 1833 but European pressure, concerned to reinforce Ottoman power in the eastern Mediterranean, forced the withdrawal of Egyptian forces by 1841.

The decade of Egyptian control, however, had brought order and stability on a scale the Ottomans had never achieved. Aleppo, Tripoli and Sidon (including Acre) were now under the command of the Damascus governor and the introduction of a more effective administration and legal system prepared the region for the reforms that would be introduced in the coming decades. A more outward-looking environment in Istanbul encouraged a greater European presence, even in remote corners of the empire like Damascus. The Europeans' interest in the Levant was in turn aroused. Damascus was opened up to the outside world and European consulates encouraged again. Its recent rival, Acre, was now in ruins, its fortifications dismantled at the request of the European powers (1840). Damascus, like other centres, received its first representative body, a council (*majlis al-shura*) advising the Egyptian governor in local administration; a more formal version of the *diwan* or governor's panel of advisers of the past. The city also received the benefit of the Egyptians' enthusiasm for reform in town planning. The nascent new Ottoman zone to the west of the city (Sahat Marj) was further refashioned under the Egyptians with the present-day Sharia Nasr as the focus.⁴⁴ The Mosque of Tengiz, as mentioned earlier, was converted for use as a military school, while the administration's military and civil headquarters were located on the south side of the thoroughfare. These moves paved the way for the overall redevelopment of the area in the late nineteenth century, examined in the next chapter.

Notes

- 1 Meinecke 1978: 577–578. The mosque was expanded in the 1940s by two further aisles extending its *qibla* wall to the south.
- 2 Bakhit 1982: 163.
- 3 Maundrell 1732: 172.
- 4 Barbir 1980: 154; Rafeq 1966: 61; Raymond 1979: 119.
- 5 Barbir 1980: 108.

- 6 Raymond 1985: 200.
- 7 Damascus population figures in the Ottoman records quoted in Barkan 1958: 27; repeated in Dols 1977: 196 (1520–1530 = 57,326, 1595 = 42,779). Pascual sees these figures as problematic as there are many reasons why not all the population would be counted. His count is based on a population density of 285 persons per hectare for a total populated area of 200 hectares (including suburbs). Abdel Nour 1982: 73; Establet and Pascual 1994: 16; Raymond 1985: 63.
- 8 Lewis 1940–42.
- 9 After 1600 the tendency was to create further governorates including Sidon and to recognise the administrative autonomy of certain troublesome areas such as the Lebanese Mountain.
- 10 Maundrell 1732: 173.
- 11 De Thévenot (English trans. 1687): Part II, Ch IV, 21; Deguilhem in Desmet-Grègoire and Georgion 1997: 129.
- 12 Desmet-Grègoire and Georgion 1997: 129. The nearby fountain, latrines and baths indicate that this spot has long been associated with pleasure and relaxation, probably going back to Roman times.
- 13 Weber 1997–98 part I: 434.
- 14 The project is not listed in the catalogue of Sinan's works but the timing of its construction, its imperial commissioning and the fact that the original banded stonework of the lower layers was abandoned as the building was reconstructed in its upper floors strongly suggest that the project was completed by Sinan's team concurrently in Damascus. Meinecke 1978: 581–582.
- 15 Establet and Pascual 1994: 16.
- 16 Laoust 1952: 186–187.
- 17 Meinecke 1978: 583 n.27 notes that none of Lala Mustafa Pasha's buildings survive, several of them actually victims of twentieth-century rebuilding.
- 18 De Thévenot 1687 II: 15.
- 19 Establet and Pascual 1994: 12–13; Raymond 1985: 237; Weber 2000: 245.
- 20 Raymond 1985: 249.
- 21 Weber 1997–98 part I: 449.
- 22 Murad had earlier built the Khan al-Muradiye (1593), which survives adjacent to the Khan al-Jumruk to the north though radically altered during a nineteenth-century rebuilding.
- 23 Schatkowski Schilcher 1985: 32.
- 24 According to Raymond's figures, 43 per cent of Damascus' streets were cul-de-sacs – Raymond 1985: 186.
- 25 Records survive from the archives and court records (both in Turkey and in Damascus) illuminate many of these aspects and have drawn the attention of a growing number of scholars in recent decades.
- 26 Abdel Nour 1982: 346, 370.
- 27 D'Arvieux 1635 II: 445–444 – author's translations; Sirriyeh 1984: 131–132.
- 28 D'Arvieux 1635 II: 463–464 – author's translation.
- 29 D'Arvieux 1635 II: 455–456 – author's translation.
- 30 Maundrell (Howell ed.) 1732: 168.
- 31 Barbir 1980: 53.
- 32 Pococke 1745: 125. The Venetian consulate operated in Aleppo from 1548 to 1675 – Masters 1988: 14.
- 33 Rafeq 1966: 180; Masters 1988: 32.
- 34 Made from locally collected alkali.
- 35 Hitti 1951: 671.
- 36 Raymond 1985: 77.
- 37 Schatkowski Schilcher 1985: 115; Rafeq 1966: 43–50.
- 38 Schatkowski Schilcher 1985: 35.

- 39 Weber 2000: 247.
- 40 Rafeq 1966: 182.
- 41 Weber 1997–08: 447.
- 42 Volney (Gaulmier ed.) 1959: 321 – author’s translation.
- 43 The Suq al-Jadid was destroyed by fire in the next century and replaced by the Suq al-Hamidiye – Rafeq 1966: 309. A small section of the Suq al-Arwam survives.
- 44 Sack 1998: 190–191; Weber 1998.

15

REFORM AND REVITALISATION (1840–1918)

Tanzimat – reform and reaction

The restoration of Ottoman authority after the Egyptian occupation came with a conscious ‘ottomanisation’ of Damascus, a process encouraged by the Tanzimat (‘orderings’) administrative reforms, the first series of which was introduced at Istanbul in 1839. The changes reoriented the functions of the state towards a more European model, away from the complex Ottoman system that had represented an unwieldy balance between the power of local bosses and the centre; religious versus civil authority. The opening of more active links with Europe, encouraged by the Ottoman process of reform, saw greater recognition of minorities’ rights leading to their full status as citizens of the empire.

The reforms thus had the effect of improving the lot of non-Muslim subjects. One of the effects of the Egyptian period of rule in Syria had been to complete the legal emancipation of the *dhimmis*. The Tanzimat reforms translated these changes into Ottoman law. Christians and Jews had become intermediaries between the European trading interests and the local economy. As early as the period of al-Jazar’s rise to power in Acre, the prominent Jewish banking family from Damascus, the Farhis, had become an essential factor in the tyrant’s success. The position of the minorities, however, was inherently fragile as resentment of their European links grew even while their favoured position was consolidated. Tensions between communities remained, many being played out in the Lebanon where the status of Mount Lebanon, contested between Maronite and Druze, became a long-running source of wider tensions. The relatively favourable position of the religious minorities by the nineteenth century opened the way for expanded European missionary activity, directed partly at luring the smaller eastern rite communities towards the Catholic mainstream or the Jews towards the Protestant denominations. This brought improved standards of education to

present-day Lebanon and Syria. The number of Christians in Damascus by 1860 had grown to 22,000 and Jews 4,000.

Two instances of anti-minority feeling in Damascus caught the headlines in Europe. Though they were different in scale, both had the effect of maintaining European pressure on the Ottoman authorities to continue the process of reform begun under the Egyptian occupation. The first instance came in 1840 when members of the Damascus Jewish community were accused of the ritual murder of a Christian boy, perhaps the first manifestation of European-style anti-Semitism in the Middle East. Prominent Jewish families including members of the Farhi dynasty were imprisoned and tortured.¹ (The second anti-minority outbreak is examined in the next section.)

The restoration of Ottoman central authority in 1841 saw the appointment of Muhammad Najib Pasha as governor. His mandate was not only to implant the first wave of Tanzimat reforms, mainly in the fields of revenue raising and extending administration in rural districts, but also to suppress the influence of local militia leaders. To maintain rule from Istanbul and press ahead with reforms, the Ottoman authorities relied increasingly on co-opting local supporters. It was no longer appropriate to rely on *a'yans* to take full control; instead local notables were coopted via the governor's council or *majlis*. The bulk of the military presence now comprised regular Ottoman forces with some elements raised by local conscription. A residual role for the local militia, however, was to persist for many years as central government coffers were unable to raise the forces required, even for the protection of the *Hajj*. Consequently the Midan quarter, which had attracted an increasingly sizeable migration from the countryside often linked to the burgeoning grain trade, remained largely in the hands of the local quarter bosses (*aghawat*).

Syria's trade with the rest of the world grew exponentially in the early nineteenth century. In 1820, total sea-borne foreign trade was estimated at (British) pounds 500,000. By the 1860s it was 4.5 million pounds and in 1910 10 million.² Decline of local industries under European competition, however, set in by the nineteenth century. Part of the initial success of Beirut's revival as an international port came from launching great quantities of cheap European industrially produced textiles on the Syrian market. Steam navigation after 1835 improved the reliability of supply and drove many local producers of cloth out of business. Moreover, Europe had little need of many of the items that Syria had traditionally produced and the balance of trade moved critically against Syria. Ottoman changes to the import tariff structure under European pressure made the situation worse. Reserves disappeared to pay for imports and capital became scarce. Moreover, Beirut moved more adeptly to adjust to the new reality and found a product that Europe could not source as cheaply elsewhere: silk cloth produced from the local silk-worm industry. By mid-century, a flight of entrepreneurs from Damascus to Beirut ensued.

An extraordinary personality arrived on the Damascus scene at this time. 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jeza'iri was an Algerian patriot who fought for 15 years against the French conquest of his country. Exiled first to France and later to the Ottoman

Empire, he was resettled in Damascus by agreement with Istanbul in 1855, supported by a lavish French pension.

Arriving in Damascus abruptly in the mid-1850s with a huge personal entourage, a huge independent income and a formidable contingent of paramilitaries, 'Abd al-Qadir sent shock waves through the city... an extraordinary phenomenon with which none of the older Damascene families, not even the 'Azems, could compete.³

He acquired for this large entourage a series of three houses in the Inner 'Amara quarter of the old city, just south of the Barada.⁴

1860 massacre

The second instance of a popular backlash against the socio-economic changes that reform was seen to have introduced, this time considerably more extended in its scope and implications, came in 1860. Ostensibly these disturbances flowed from outside events. Tensions between Druze and Christians in the Chouf region of Mount Lebanon had begun in June, later spreading to the towns of the southern Beqa'a and to Zahle, a Christian town north of the Beirut-Damascus road. Refugees, particularly from the Beqa'a began to stream into Damascus, taking refuge in the Christian quarter. A detailed study of the period has shown, however, the real causes were probably a good deal more complex than an offshoot from the Lebanese tensions. It reflected, though in a form totally different from the 1840 example, the intense resentment towards the privileged position that European protection provided the minority community.⁵

In Damascus, the impact of the tensions and the sudden influx of Christian refugees resonated amidst local political factors relating to worsening economic conditions, particularly for the Muslim community. The decline of exports due to European competition had brought the closure of many cotton textile workshops. While Syrian grain exports had boomed during the period of the Crimean War, Damascus was still excessively reliant on European financiers to fund foreign trade while the demands of the Ottoman tax collector were increasingly ruthless. By contrast, the Europeans' local (usually Christian or Jewish) protégés now held the same status as the citizens of the protecting states, giving them privileges (including access to capital) that most Damascenes could not enjoy. The two decades between 1840 and 1860 had simply piled too much social change on the Muslims' plate. They had had to accept relegation from being the community that controlled the agenda at every level to a situation in which the Christians had the upper hand.⁶ The fact that the Christians (less so the Jews) flaunted their new status through provocative behaviour exacerbated the situation in a way that the Ottoman authorities had not anticipated. It was easy to exploit popular resentment against the European stranglehold over the local economy and to see the *dhimmi* communities as profiting from the increasing discomfort of the rest.

Tensions in Damascus increased during June as more refugees from the Chouf Mountains in Lebanon (shared by Druze and Christians) streamed into the city. The authorities took some measures to prevent events getting out of hand and several Muslim notables actively sought to calm tensions and protect the Christians. Governor Fuad Pasha, however, failed to signal the right mixture of firmness and judicious restraint. In handing out disproportionate punishment to a group of small boys who had taunted Christians, he inflamed the Muslim population at a time when the atmosphere was already highly combustible. On 9 July the terror began with a mob bursting into the Christian quarters within the old city of Damascus. Other mobs promptly arrived from Midan, Salihiye and Shugur, overwhelming any hopes the authorities might have had of keeping order, particularly when elements of the police joined the rioters. By late afternoon, the city was given over to the mobs now supplemented by Druzes and Muslims from surrounding villages.

Over eight days, possibly 2,000 Christians were massacred (of the 8,000 to 10,000 Christians within the old city),⁷ others were raped or abducted and their property looted. Thousands managed to flee, usually given refuge by Muslim families (often a dangerous move for the hosts) and from there taken into the Citadel. Churches, including the Greek Orthodox patriarchal seat, Saint Mary's, were sacked. The key role in saving a large percentage of the Christian population of the old city was played by 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jeza'iri. His complex in the Inner 'Amara quarter provided initial refuge to hundreds of Christians who were sent in successive convoys to Muslim safe houses or the Citadel and subsequently out of the city.

The whole of the eastern end of the city north Straight Street, 3,000 or more houses, was comprehensively burnt out, each house torched after the mob had been through it, carrying away the treasure on donkeys or carts. A photo taken after the riots showed a scene resembling Berlin in 1945, the destruction so total that in the later reconstruction, there was no point in retaining most of what remained east of Bab Tuma Street. The quarter was replanned retaining the few features that had survived such as the underground Chapel of Saint Ananias.

So convinced were the European powers that a concerted attack was being made on the Christian communities that a 3,000 strong expeditionary force was sent from France, though it arrived too late to play any conceivable role in calming the city and did not proceed beyond the Lebanon. Its main achievement was to convince the Ottomans that at all costs they should prevent the Europeans from using the events as an excuse for a wider intervention in the area. Meeting the immediate needs of the survivors was the next major problem. The Ottoman authorities had no immediate means to mount a relief program. The European consuls helped until their resources ran out. Thousands of refugees were taken to Beirut in organised evacuations from mid-July but the rest were left to fend for themselves, largely in the open amid the ruins of their devastated homes, until August when an official relief program could begin. By November, however, few Christians were left in the city, most having sought refuge elsewhere. A proportion would never return; those who had fled to Beirut would find that the burgeoning economy of post-1860 Lebanon provided a more attractive environment for enterprise.

The fact that the Jewish community was entirely spared illustrated that the mob did not focus on *dhimmi* communities in general. Moreover, many Christian communities were not attacked (notably those most exposed outside the old city) and many Muslims acted vigorously to defend or shelter their fellow citizens. Whatever had been the immediate spark, the combustible material 'was not religious fanaticism . . . but the growing gap between the rich and the poor', in the opinion of the most recent historian of the events, Leila Tarazi Fawaz,⁸ though the fact that differences were exacerbated by the confessional divide cannot be ignored.

The reaction in Istanbul was one of consternation. The consequences of such a major breakdown in the Ottoman system were readily appreciated. Even before European reactions built up, the authorities quickly accepted that they had to respond credibly to these events and address its causes. The foreign minister, Fuad Pasha, had already been despatched from Istanbul to conduct an investigation into the Chouf disturbances and a force of 15,000 soldiers sent to re-establish order. Fuad arrived in Damascus on 29 July. His retribution was swift and decisive. The negligence of Governor Ahmad Pasha was recognised and his execution by firing squad followed. By 20 August, some 167 men were found responsible and executed. The first group executions were staged with maximum exemplary effect. One hundred and ten members of the militia were found guilty and taken out to the Midan al-Akhdar in shackles. They were given five minutes with their families and then shot en masse. A quarter of those eventually found responsible were from the militia but an equal number were traders or craftsmen, the rest mainly the dispossessed or desperate from the city's periphery. Some notables were arrested and executed the next year but a greater number were exiled, including all the members of the *majlis*.⁹ The Muslim community was ordered to pay a sizeable indemnity and to deliver 2,000 conscripts to be sent for service elsewhere in the empire. The most remarkable outcome, however, was, as Schatkowski Schilcher points out, that 'the Ottomans succeeded not only in retaining and pacifying the city but also in severely disciplining its most powerful faction', namely those most adamantly opposed to the Tanzimat reforms that had been perceived as favouring the position of Christians and Jews. The Ottomans had finally convinced the Damascene notables that only by cooperating within the imperial framework could Damascus hold firm against European dominance.¹⁰ The lesson was apparently well learnt: by the end of the century, the Sunni elite again formed the dominant force in the city's politics and the influence of the Christian and Jewish communities diminished in the more open political system the reforms encouraged.¹¹

The atmosphere of post-1860 Damascus is well documented in the experiences of Isabel and Richard Burton. Richard Burton was appointed as British Consul in Damascus in 1869 and both quickly became enthusiasts for the city. Isabel provided many of the insights that their writings give into the life of the tiny European colony at a time when the city was beginning to lose some of its inhibitions in its contacts with the outside world. Richard was too uncompromising a character with too varied an agenda (African and South American exploration, his adoption of Islam and pilgrimage to Mecca) to have survived easily in the enclosed world

of late Ottoman Damascus. His appointment proved too difficult for the Foreign Office to defend, particularly against the criticism relayed by the Jewish community that he had failed to be sufficiently interventionist to protect the interests of local moneylenders. Many had acquired British nationality under the provisions of the Ottoman capitulation treaties and expected British protection for practices which Burton regarded as usurious. Although London saw no grounds to rule Burton in error, his withdrawal became the easier option and the couple departed Damascus after less than two years in the city they had grown to love. In spite of the differences between their backgrounds, the strictly Catholic Isabel befriended one of the few English residents of Damascus, Lady Ellenborough (Jane Digby) who, after an illustrious career involving alliances with several European figures ranging from the Bavarian nobility to an Albanian warlord, settled in Damascus and became the wife of one of the *sheikhs* of the Syrian desert, Medjuel al-Mezrab. Amir Jeza'iri was the fifth member of this circle which often gathered at the Burtons' house in Salihaye for conversations late into the night. Such meetings between East and West might look stilted in modern terms from Isabel's writing but it was a rare attempt to bridge the enormous cultural divisions that existed at the time and reflected the slow process under which Damascus was reaching out for new ways of looking at the world, and vice versa.¹²

A 'Little Istanbul'

The 1860 experience convinced Istanbul that many Damascene notables had failed in their civic responsibilities and that it must assert more direct control over them. Rashid Pasha (1866–1871) was intended to be the first of a new breed of governors but his successors were less able to stem demands for local autonomy. Sympathetic pressure by European powers resulted in the appointment of the retired official, Midhat Pasha, as governor in Damascus in 1878. Midhat gave fresh impetus to the reinvigoration of the city by initiatives in construction and town planning including the realignment of the western end of Straight Street to form the covered Suq Midhat Pasha. In an attempt not only to provide for vehicular traffic but to correct the errant alignment of 'Straight' Street, Midhat Pasha drove his new widened thoroughfare with its uniform façades through to the western edge of the city along a line angled at a couple of degrees to the Roman Via Recta, meeting the Suq al-Sinaniye 30 metres north of Bab al-Jabiya.

The results of the new trial of strength between the Porte and the local leaders were ambiguous. In effect, while Damascus came under much closer supervision by the Istanbul authorities and the *a'yan* now only retained their influence at the pleasure of the Porte, a policy of cooperation with the urban notables gained primacy. This return to cooption completed a process that went back to 1830 but the pace was quickened by the introduction of municipal self-government. The 1864 Law of the Provinces gave new powers to the *majlis*. Land reform opened up the acquisition of land to new elements of the political elite that emerged in Damascus by the end of the century. The improvements in communications and the success

of the 'ottomanisation' policy meant that increasing numbers of the elite lived or studied in Istanbul, intermarried with Turkish families and learned Turkish. Access to western education and reform of the courts system loosened the influence of the *'ulama*, though there remained a remarkable continuity in the status of the elite families whose influence continued to range across the fields of religion, business and political life. The introduction of representative institutions simply gave them a new lease of life.

The decades between 1860 and 1914 marked a new era of prosperity which in retrospect makes a mockery of the common assumption that Turkey along with its provinces stumbled towards decline and disintegration. While the picture may have some validity in the Balkans, in 'Arabistan', the broad name the Ottomans gave to their Syrian possessions, it was a different picture altogether. The events of 1860 clearly coloured the views of European travellers. It had taken a long time for Damascus to shake off its reputation as inhospitable towards foreigners; after 1860 that move towards openness suffered a temporary reverse. A visiting English clergyman, Henry Tristram, scowled disapprovingly in his description of the city after a visit in the early 1860s: 'After the first dazzling effect had worn off, it was rather a disappointing place. Much filth, endless tortuous streets, miserable exteriors, sumptuous palaces, bustling, shabby, but rich bazaars, repulsive smells, and piteous ruins'.¹³

Architectural styles, both domestic and official, reflected the new period of peace and an assured prosperity for those families close to the Ottoman power structure. While Damascus never became as 'Ottoman' a city as Aleppo, where the Arab Sunni elite was diluted by considerable Turkish, Christian-Arab and Armenian elements, a distinctly Turkish 'look' marked the closing decades of the Ottoman era. A new emphasis on town planning and architectural development ushered in an extraordinary process of urban regeneration partly meant to house the new institutions. The Istanbul fashion for European-style architecture now became the norm that more or less obliterated the local tradition in everything from public buildings to domestic structures. The process started under the reign of Abdulaziz (1861–1876) but hastened considerably under the more enthusiastic builder, Abdulhamid II (1876–1909) and (after the ending of the sultans' power) the Young Turks (1908–1918). Abdulhamid wound back the movement towards constitutional rule in 1878 with the abolition of parliament. He attempted to rally his shrinking realm through alternative means, namely the revival of the caliphal claims of the sultanate. The concept of an Islamic state (helpful in blurring its essentially Turkish core) to some extent favoured Damascus as the *Hajj* remained the key to the Porte's credentials even though the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 had given many pilgrims a sea option.

During these 50 years, the city was transformed at a rate not experienced since Nur al-Din's time. The clearest indication was the development of its western extension. Early in the Ottoman period, the governor's palace had been embedded in the military zone immediately west of the walls, the northern anchor point of the new monumental precinct that joined the city to the Midan (page 274).

The push further westwards followed the creation of the Tekkiye and the Madrasa Suleimaniye in the sixteenth century but stalled when in the next century the *a'yan*s preferred to move the focus of the city's upgrading back within the walls. While the Citadel remained the base and refuge for the Ottoman presence, a new *seraya* or administrative headquarters had been built in the second half of the sixteenth century immediately south of the path (the Darb al-Marj) that connected the Bab al-Nasr to the Tekkiye (Map 3). The building was either altered or rebuilt after the departure of the Egyptian occupation force.¹⁴

Religious institutions, notably the Tekkiye at its western extremity, had already reinforced the Ottoman character of this area. The zone now became studded with other Sufi institutions favoured by the Ottoman military, for example the smaller *tekkiye* of the Mawlawiye (Mevliviye or 'whirling dervish' sect).¹⁵ The existing Yalbugha and Sanjakdar Mosques, as well as several mosques lying in the zone stretching south to the Mosque of Murad Pasha, serviced a Turkish clientele.

By the nineteenth century, the need to find further room for new institutions strengthened the renewed drive westwards. Along this axis, the Mosque of Tengiz had already been pressed into service as a military base during the Egyptian occupation. The line of the Darb al-Marj became the southern limit of the zone that was to be the showpiece of Ottoman civilisation: a 'Little Istanbul' (Map 3). The space between the Tengiz and Yalbugha mosques provided the focus of a new quarter spanning both sides of the Barada, until then still mostly encircled by orchards and gardens with the occasional mosque or tomb to interrupt the verdant scene. This new focus on Merdje Square (1866) was made possible by channeling the Barada to tame the annual flood and providing permanent decking over the stream to form a broad plaza.¹⁶

Damascus thus acquired a quarter that reflected the European-influenced tastes of late Ottoman society. The availability of this land to the west relieved pressure on the old city, fortuitously sparing it from major changes that might have obliterated its complex tapestry of the past. The new quarter also provided a base for activities such as foreign trade and tourism, the latter encouraged as the Holy Land travel industry sprang up in the late nineteenth century. Damascus had now overcome its reputation for fanatical hostility towards foreigners and rapidly became a feasible diversion from the route to or from Jerusalem. It was in the mid-nineteenth century that the first hotel provided European travellers with an alternative to the traditional *khan*. Thomas Cook ran its first organised groups in the 1860s. By the turn of the century, the tourist was shielded from much of the assault on the senses the old city represented. By then two sizeable hotels were established specifically for the European trade: the purpose built Grand Hotel Victoria (1898–1899, demolished 1952) just north of the bridge whose location still bears its name; and an Anatolian style family house adapted around 1900 as the Damascus Palace Hotel (destroyed by fire in the late 1950s), just north of the Yalbugha Mosque.

The official architectural style was a Turkish version of European neoclassical: triangular pediments, columns, rigidly rectangular windows, often small-scale copies of projects in the Turkish capital. The new 'civic' centre reached its full

flowering by 1900 with the new courts of justice (1878), town hall (1894) and police headquarters (c.1900; all have disappeared), the last of these mimicking an 1835 Istanbul barracks building. West of Merdje Square on the north bank of the Barada, a new civil *seraya* was constructed in 1899, now the headquarters of the Interior Ministry. A little to the east, immediately north of the Citadel, Taht al-Qala'a, the favoured area for promenades along the Barada, was still marked by the same mix of jugglers, acrobats, musicians and reciters of poetry that congregated there in Mamluk times. The patch of land between the Barada and Qanawat streams (Bayn al-Nahrain, 'between the two rivers') was still the chosen spot for taking coffee or a *narghilla* in the cool shade of the river bank.

Urban reform did not end with the Ottomans' ambitions. The Young Turks who overthrew the Sultan's system in 1908 did not abandon the idea of a Turkish–Arab destiny for the empire, though they sought to steer the state towards a more liberal order and the restoration of the pre-1876 constitution. In 1916, the broad avenue leading north from the Hijaz Station (Sharia Sa'd Allah al-Jabri or Port Said St) was completed to form a link to the area north of Victoria Bridge, thus further defining the 'new Istanbul' quarter. The western limit of the quarter had already been described by the Hamidiye Barracks (1895), a huge quadrilateral building which survives as the main quadrangle of the old campus of the University of Damascus (Map 6).

Telegraph, road and rail

The first manifestation of the new age of technology had reached Damascus in 1861 with the opening of the first telegraph line between Beirut and Damascus. A direct connection to Istanbul came two years later when Damascus was connected to Aleppo and from there to the Anatolian system. As a symbol of the modernisation of the city, a bronze column was erected in the middle of Merdje Square in 1905 to commemorate the opening of the fully Ottoman controlled telegraph line, Istanbul to Mecca via Damascus, the funding for which was raised by public subscription. The column still stands, a rather eclectic statement by the Ottoman court architect, the Italian Raimondo D'Aranco, topped by a model of the Hamidiye Cami in Istanbul, a favourite project of Abdulhamid II.

The first macadamised road linking Damascus to the coast with a daily stagecoach service had been opened in 1863 under a concession established by a Frenchman resident in Beirut. The 110 kilometres link replaced a route that had been no more than a mule track, the ancient Roman road having long ago fallen into disuse. The new link recognised the clear lead Beirut now held as the port for Damascus (imports into Beirut rose 20-fold between 1841 and 1860, exports by a factor of 40), later confirmed by the opening of a new harbour facility at Beirut in 1892. Damascus was serviced by the first railway link in the 1890s (see Map 11), a 103 kilometre line to Muzayrib in the Hauran (the main grain-growing area) opened in 1894. In 1895 a 147 kilometre narrow-gauge (1.05 metre) line to Beirut via Rayak in the Beqa'a Valley was completed in less than three years, a major achievement

given the difficulties in straddling Mount Lebanon via the Dar al-Beida pass (1,487 metres) and negotiating the confined gorge of the Barada. The trip from Beirut to Damascus took nine hours and there were initially three stations at the Damascus end: Baramke, Qanawat and Midan.¹⁷

While the French rail project did much to reinforce the key role of Damascus in the region, a British plan to link Damascus and Haifa by rail, descending to the coastal plain of Palestine via the Yarmuk gorge, was seen as a potential threat to the growing importance of Beirut. The British project turned out to be no sustained threat. After many false starts, the 233 kilometre line was replanned as a branch of the project for a line to Mecca (see the next section) to run via Dera'a. Construction was completed in 1906 though the line had been 'opened' the year before. In its heyday, two trains a day left Haifa, the trip to Damascus (Hijaz Station) taking just over 11 hours. Branch lines to Acre and Jenin were established just before the First World War. The 1.05 metre-gauge Haifa–Dera'a track would encounter many vicissitudes over the decades (including sabotage efforts by T.E. Lawrence's forces during the First World War) and the service rarely ran with any reliability. However, the complex course of the rail line along the Yarmuk (with 14 viaducts and seven tunnels) can still be glimpsed, including the spectacular sight of one of its iron bridges dropped into the lower Yarmuk west of al-Hamma by Jewish saboteurs in 1946, effectively closing down the line.

The drive to modernise also resulted in the letting of concessions to European companies to develop new means of transport within Damascus. Merdje Square, expanded and formalised in 1884, became the focal point of an electric tramway system run by a Belgian company under a 1904 concession that also allowed for the electrification of the city (Map, Historical development). The main tram depot and electricity generating station lay north of Victoria Bridge and the first electric street lamps, 1,442 of them, were turned on in 1907. The laying of tram-lines required the widening of several streets outside the old city. The central line (1907) was a link from Merdje running along the western edge of the old city and down the Suq al-Sinaniye to the Midan. A second line joined Merdje Square to Jisr al-Abiad, later extending to Muhajrin and Salhiye quarters (1913). (A link to Bab Tuma was later added, requiring the widening of the street running parallel to the northern walls which was later named Sharia al-Malik al-Feisal.) The last modern means of transport to reach Damascus was the aeroplane. The first landing in Damascus took place in 1912, using the meadows that still survived in the neighbourhood of the Tekkiye.

To Mecca by train?

From 1900, while work on these projects was reaching fruition, planning was underway for the long-held Ottoman objective of linking Anatolia to the Hijaz by rail, announced that year to celebrate the 25th year of Sultan Abdulhamid II's reign. The project had its supporters in Damascus, not least one of the Sultan's Arab advisers, Ahmad Izzat Pasha al-'Abid, an entrepreneur who had made his

fortune in the Hauran grain trade before the 1890s depression caused prices to plummet. 'Abid, whose entrepreneurial talents saw the construction of the first multi-purpose commercial project in Damascus, the 'Abid Building (1906–1910) (still standing on the southern side of Merdje Square) saw the Hijaz project as a way of lifting southern Syria out of its slump.

Given the formidable difficulties of construction in such remote terrain, the line was not inaugurated until 1908. Everything was thrown into the project: levies on the salaries of imperial officials; the labour of numerous Turkish military units; funds raised by schoolchildren. Abdulhamid had hoped to make one of the first pilgrimages by rail but was foiled by the Young Turks' coup. Though a purely Ottoman-financed project using only Muslim labour, an engineer of German origin, Meissner Pasha, oversaw construction. The line only operated normally for six years (1908–1914) and offered a limited capacity in view of the stocks of water and wood it had to carry. Most pilgrims continued to travel by sea. The gauge had been set at 1.05 metres to facilitate carriage of material via the existing line from Beirut. The 1,320 kilometre Damascus–Medina journey took nearly three days with three trains a week servicing the line.¹⁸ It followed the track of the traditional caravan, using the watering points and easy gradients identified over the centuries.

The railway departed Damascus at the Qadem station, the site associated with the departure point of the *Hajj*, south of Midan. It was some years before a city terminal was completed. A final flourish was reserved for this most symbolic of late-Ottoman projects, a new Damascus gateway to the Hijaz bringing the city's role in the *Hajj* into a new era. The Hijaz Station (1917) stands at the western end of the axis leading from the old city (now Sharia Nasr). One of the most delightfully bizarre buildings in the city, it represented a full turning of the circle, as Stefan Weber recently pointed out: local style triumphs in a European-designed orientalis-ing building which borrows heavily from an assumed Damascene repertoire.¹⁹ Also the work of a European (Spanish) architect, Fernando de Aranda, the wonderfully ornate ticket hall survives decades of neglect and insensitive restoration with all its orientalis-ing features intact, though the main railway terminal long ago moved back south of the city to the Qadem station. After France declared war on Germany in 1914, Turkey lined up with the Germans and all French interests including the railways were confiscated. The Beirut line, by now supplemented by a link to Homs and Aleppo, operated as part of the Turkish railway system.

The railway bordered on the west the Midan, Bab Allah and Qadem extensions of the old city. The Midan, long associated with the religious purpose of the *Hajj* and with the trade exchanges that went with it, now took on a more distinctly industrial character. Its links to the grain trade from the south were consolidated around the grain storage depots (*bawa'ik*) interspersed between the mosque and tombs. Large numbers of impoverished Arab migrants to the city also naturally congregated there as the population of Damascus swelled. The religious emphasis of the area correspondingly diminished, though it offered several centres of mystic teaching that would not have been welcomed in the intensely Sunni old city or in the Turkish-oriented western extension.



FIGURE 15.1 Hijaz Station, façade

The city's overall population level was now estimated by regular census but the figures are widely seen as an underestimate since tax collection was based on the size of households. The figure of 150,000 given by the Irish clergyman, Rev. Josias Porter, in the 1850s allowed for this factor but may be a little high particularly as other sources gave estimates of around 110,000. Official figures for the last decades of the nineteenth century surged by almost 19 per cent in the 12 years between 1888 and 1900. The official Ottoman figure for 1900 was over 140,000 but this was not the end of the surge. It rose to 235,000 in 1917 by which point many distressed and famished villagers had moved into the city in search of food.²⁰ Between 1896 and 1900 a new quarter west of Salahiye, al-Muhajrin, received Muslim refugees from Rumelia and Crete, the latter choosing not to remain after the Greek takeover of the island. This new quarter was laid out on a small grid plan and matched on the western side the Kurdish quarter that had grown up at the eastern end of the slopes of Kassyun.²¹

The great fire of 1893

We go back a few years now to look at an event which represents one of the most important setbacks to the preservation of the city's past. In 1893 the third of the great fires that consumed the Great Mosque of Damascus broke out, started by an unfortunate workman. Perched on the roof renewing the pitch sealing, he paused to light his pipe and the splendour of 12 centuries rapidly disappeared in the ensuing flames. The fire was devastating in its effects on the building, as can be seen in

the photos of the gutted remains. Some of the decorations of the prayer hall that had escaped the fire of 1069 and Tamerlane's 1400 blaze were now lost for ever. The remaining mosaics perished in incandescent showers; the marble panelling of the walls crumbled into heaps of lime. The beautiful *karma* band richly picked out in gold leaf, the tiles added over the centuries, the *mihrab* with its delicate colonnettes in the Byzantine style, 30 of the original columns of the great basilica-shaped hall and their surmounting arcades: all were lost. The timber roof and the extensive use of carpets as floor coverings probably ensured a conflagration of maximum intensity. The thick, largely Roman, outer walls of the Jupiter Temple *temenos* survived, as did the structure of the transept and even the lead-covered dome. But the sad mounds of remains inside the gutted shell were simply cleared away, the fractured columns broken up to make roads, and the interior rebuilt in a ruthlessly plain style: perhaps wisely not seeking to restore the treatment of the original. The rebuilding took nine years and given the impoverishment of Ottoman finances and Damascene commitment to see the Mosque restored, much of the work was done by volunteer labour. The great timber roof was replaced and the opportunity taken to rebuild the weakened dome in late-Ottoman style with a slightly peaked cap. As noted earlier (page 171), a few scattered remains of the interior mosaics survived in the upper structure of the transept including over the inner face of the north wall but they are too distant to convey much sense of the original glittering firmament that awed the visitor.

Suq al-Hamidiye

The fire extended to much of the quarter lying west of the Mosque. This proved a perfect opportunity for Abdulhamid to finalise the replanning of the western approach to the Great Mosque, first initiated in the mid-1880s, in the process giving the city a more European 'look'. The new thoroughfare, the Suq al-Hamidiye, represented an iron-roofed version of the *galleria* of contemporary Europe with uniform shop façades.²² For the first time, the area was reserved exclusively for retailing (no workshops allowed) and quickly became the fashionable location for ladies' clothing and textile stores. This replanning of the western axis leading to the Mosque thus completed the reorientation of the city's commercial activities by joining the Mosque to the 'Little Istanbul' to the west. The Greek temple had been oriented towards the commercial zone to the east around the *agora*, later the Roman forum. By Ayyubid times, the commercial heart of the city had partly drifted to the south, towards the central area of Straight Street. In Ottoman times the new emphasis was on the west, towards Midan, the Tekkiye and later north-west towards Merdje. Now the commercial heart of the city, already reoriented towards the heartland of the *a'yans*, followed the new axis leading directly towards the western entrance of the Mosque. The clockwise rotation through 180 degrees had taken two millennia to complete.

Access to the old city had been improved by widening other major shopping precincts and imparting a more European look to their façades, for example the

straightening and partial widening of the Suq al-Bazuriye and, as earlier noted, Suq Midhat Pasha (both 1878).²³ The traditional warehouses and long-distance trade remained concentrated (as they are today) on the Suq Midhat Pasha whose harmonised façade now housed cheaper clothing and textile outlets.²⁴

The Damascus house

The rest of the old city, however, was largely left untouched by government-sponsored projects, though a trend towards domestic rebuilding was stimulated by new building and planning codes. This adaptation along Anatolian lines is still evident in the look of many of the old streets of the walled city. Instead of the Damascene courtyard house, which had been standard for centuries, domestic buildings in the Anatolian (or 'Konak') style now looked outwards onto the street rather than in towards a central courtyard. Wooden-framed windows, often leaning perilously over the street, now became standard with screens or shutters, a concession to modesty in the narrow thoroughfares. The traditional *qa'a* became a heavily decorated Ottoman salon (*salya*). The method of construction became lighter and the finish less permanent. The structure of Damascus houses, as the travellers' accounts note, had for long been made of light materials with stone reserved for prestige treatment. Now even the prestige touches were of less permanent materials. Instead of stone ornamentation in public rooms such as the *qa'a*, the finish is plaster with painted decoration. The speed with which the new style caught on was facilitated by the frequency with which houses were refurbished or rebuilt during the boom brought by the years of prosperity and stability after 1860.

Most remarkable was the enthusiasm with which the Damascenes saw the world through an Ottoman prism in a style imported from the Bosphorus, even down to images of the Turkish capital and its environs.²⁵ The new materials and style (not to mention the newfangled taste for free-standing furniture) leaned towards the baroque. Instead of the traditional Damascene fascination with the geometrical (a simple playing with sunlight and shade, basalt and limestone), the effect became a razzle-dazzle of colour, curves and restless eclectic detail. The effect, however, can often be magical.

Fortunately, particularly in the larger town houses, the domestic courtyards survived. They still provided a miraculous sense of relief on entering from the sun-blasted, dusty streets: quiet, colour and greenery, dappled shade and deep recesses in the form of up to four soaring *ivans*, serving as entertainment rooms depending on the season. Some examples were restored as awareness of the asset the houses represent to Damascus as a tourist destination became more evident in the decades before 2011.²⁶ Perhaps the most impressive is the Beit Nizam, a little to the south of Straight Street, east of the widened thoroughfare that leads to Bab Saghir. Actually three properties joined together over the years to house the Nizam family, it was adopted as a state reception centre. Here the whole gamut of crafts and skills that the Damascus artisan has preserved to this day are on display in a kaleidoscope of marquetry, stonework and the skillful arrangement of shade and space.



FIGURE 15.2 Late Ottoman 'Konak' houses

More central to the modern tourist's itinerary is the house built by the great *a'yan*, As'ad Pasha al-'Azem, now the Museum of Popular Arts and Crafts, just off the Suq al-Bazuriye, south of the Umayyad Mosque. The arrangement of courts and rooms is less successful and the complex suffered much from the bombardment of the quarter during the rebellion of 1925. It does, however, provide a readily available survey of the architecture of Ottoman Damascus and the high standard of craftsmanship in furniture and metalwork. Other houses now serve as restaurants. A later example of the Damascus house on the grand scale is the Museum of the City of Damascus, Beit Khalid al-'Azem, lying between the 'Uqaybe and Saruja quarters north of the walls.

Traditional industries continued to thrive, though some were seriously affected by European competition, particularly for more utilitarian items. Wares of a particularly 'Damascene' character, including fine linen, knives and marquetry, gained wider popularity again. Most industry remained artisanal well into the

twentieth century, except for the production of cloth. Workshops could still be accommodated within the confines of the old city though some heavier activities, such as milling, concentrated in the Midan, while dyeing and tanning survived at points along the Barada north and east of the old city until recent decades. Reliable trade figures were published only after 1898, indicating then that the main exports from the Damascus area remained silk and cotton fabrics followed by a range of agricultural products, notably the apricot paste for which the city is still famous. Imports were more than double the value of exports, the main items being fabrics, sugar and rice.

Command for monument protection

With Turkey's entry into the First World War on the German side in November 1914, one of the three key Young Turk leaders, Jemal Pasha, was sent to Damascus to command the Fourth Army and serve as military governor of the whole Syria–Palestine–Arabian theatre. His military campaigns, including two attempted assaults on the Suez Canal, were largely unsuccessful and his civilian administration bordered on the disastrous. The American ambassador in Istanbul at the time, Henry Morgenthau, saw Jemal's appointment as odd – 'the head of the navy sent to lead an army over the burning sands of Syria and Sinai' – but his appointment reflected the desire of the other two Young Turk triumvirate leaders to keep him as far as possible from the capital. 'He became a sort of sub-sultan, holding his own court, having his own *selamlık*, issuing his orders, dispensing freely his own kind of justice and often disregarding the authorities at Constantinople'.²⁷

Jemal was a complex, mercurial character given to fits of violence, characteristics which earned him the hatred of Arabs and the label 'Jemal the Butcher'. His personal detestation of Germans did not prevent him from accepting that Germans were effectively taking over the senior command of the Ottoman forces in Syria. Cooperation with Germany in the military, economic and cultural fields dated back to the 1890s. Sultan Abdulhamid II, 'one of the most reactionary rulers to have ascended the throne of 'Uthman', had encouraged the German connection. In the course of a long state visit, Kaiser Wilhelm II had visited Damascus in 1898 en route from Istanbul to Jerusalem. In what was intended to be a highly symbolic gesture the Kaiser visited the tomb of Saladin. In a passionate speech, he committed his empire to support 'the three hundred million Muslims who revere the Sultan as Caliph'. The two main results of this *entente* were the Berlin–Baghdad railway and the secondment of German officers to the Ottoman army. A secondary outcome was the primacy Germany enjoyed in access to archaeological concessions in Asia Minor and Syria.²⁸

Fifteen years later, Abdulhamid had gone but the creation of a joint German–Turkish 'Kommando' resulted from Jemal's incongruous enthusiasm for the modernisation of 'Arabistan' through urban renewal and the promotion of awareness of Islam's glorious past. The archaeological 'command' was led by Theodor Wiegand, a German archaeologist who had already made his name in the region,

including through his work on Palmyra and who had shown a concern to tame the Turkish armed forces' proclivity to dismantle ancient monuments to provide building materials for barracks and civic buildings.²⁹ The command's work in 1917 resulted in several important studies. The seminal two-part work of Watzinger and Wulzinger (page 83), *Damaskus: die antike Stadt* and *Damaskus: die islamische Stadt*, was not published until after the First World War but the research had doggedly been pursued during the conflict.³⁰ This resulted in the first detailed (1:2000) map of the city, still on the presses when seized by British forces in 1918.³¹

This policy of reflecting the glorious past of the city jarred with Jemal's contempt for the local Arab elite and his policy of brutal repression of any sympathisers of the Arab cause, including supporters of the Hijaz leader, Feisal. A virtual 'reign of terror' was initiated in early 1915 after the first Ottoman failure to take the Suez Canal. The first mass executions (of 11 nationalists) took place in August 1915 and in May of the next year, 21 patriots, several with connections to Damascene elite families, were hanged in Merdje Square.³²

Disproportionate retaliation on a massive scale to fears of a nationalist uprising had already sparked action against the Armenians in eastern Turkey. In an attempt to purge the empire of its major non-Islamic component, hundreds of thousands of refugees were murdered, starved to death or pushed into Syria. Some 150,000 were driven south of Aleppo where they were expected to succumb to the harsh conditions of the desert or to disease. Compared with the hundreds of thousands who died in the forced marches or the massacres at Deir al-Zor or Ras al-'Ain, those who reached Jemal's realm were the lucky ones. Most were spared by Jemal's policies as he did not see eye to eye with his Young Turk colleagues. Though his attitude to Armenian nationalism was harsh, he saw no logic in the outright annihilation of the Armenians. He preferred that they should be usefully employed on public works rather than allowed to die in the camps stretching as far south as 'Amman and Ma'an along the Hijaz Railway.³³ Significant Armenian communities thus survive in the cities of northern Syria and Lebanon and many were encouraged to seek livelihoods in Lebanon.

Jemal Pasha's policy reflected his extraordinary passion for urban renewal. Eschewing a direct role in military command, town planning became his prime obsession which he had already pursued during assignment in Baghdad in 1912³⁴ and as minister of public works. It now became part of his war objectives. A Swiss expert, Max Zürcher, was imported to draw up elaborate plans, with the emphasis on imparting a sense of grandeur to the Ottoman precinct of Damascus. The most enduring monument to his enthusiasm was the widening of the old Darb al-Marj that has joined Bab al-Nasr to the Hijaz station. Jemal Pasha Avenue, today Sharia Nasr, became the acme of Jemal's achievements 'unmatched in its beauty in any eastern city', to use his own words. The broad 650-metre-long avenue with central plantation and formal street improvements was envisaged as a monumental parade: 'a site along which government buildings could be erected and public processions including troop units could be displayed'.³⁵ Wulzinger, an architect by profession, was asked by Jemal to produce a detailed design based on a sketch conceived by the Pasha for the square in front of the station: a fabulous fountain centrepiece

‘which should be complete with cascades and lions, one with a paw resting on a Turkish flag’. Poor Wulzinger produced a design that failed adequately to reflect these essential details and the project was never realised.³⁶

Most of Jemal’s work affected areas *extra muros*, though two streets that accessed the walled city were upgraded: Bab Tuma Street and the street leading north towards Straight Street forming the western edge of the Jewish Quarter (today, al-Amin Street).³⁷ Perhaps at the time of the latter project, the central section of the southern walls of the city was removed. (This and the western wall south of the Citadel are the only sections of the walls not intact.)

However, the reality behind Jemal’s monumental ambitions was considerably more miserable. The disruption of war was greatly exacerbated by famine and disease. Theoretically the opening of the railway had assured the grain supply to Damascus, especially from the Hauran, but the blockading of the Hijaz by the Allies, mismanagement of procurement by Ottoman officials and the greed of coastal merchants meant that there was little grain available in southern Syria at reasonable price. The result was a catastrophic famine during the period 1916–1918.

Arab awakening

The Arabs of Syria had perhaps been for too long under the domination of one form of minority or outsider rule to have provided fertile ground for the growth of nineteenth century nationalism. ‘Arabistan’ felt moderately alienated from its masters but the religious bonds and the long tradition of cultural fusion in the region did much to blur the sharp edges between Arabs and Turks. Though true assimilation into Turkish culture happened only around the edges (children of the elite had begun to be educated in Istanbul, for example, or in local Turkish institutions), it would be wrong to assume the sort of cultural divide that marked the British presence in India or the Turkish presence in Greece. Separated by language, the cultures had nevertheless interacted for centuries and there was a considerable common vocabulary. Whatever overlay later Arab nationalism might provide, most Damascene notables of the late nineteenth century looked at the rest of the world through an Ottoman prism, as the wall paintings in many Damascus houses reveal. Beirut emerged more distinctly as a centre of Arab nationalism, partly due to the greater impact of European education. The emphasis on modern education weakened the ottomanisation process, particularly given the inclination of the Greek Orthodox to seek a broad uniting theme describing ‘Syria’ in modern national terms. The Syrian Protestant College, later American University of Beirut, and the Université Saint-Joseph were founded in Lebanon in 1866 and 1875, respectively, but the impact of western education in Damascus was more limited with few children of the local elite attending Christian schools until the 1890s.

Even the various attempts to form a representative assembly in Istanbul aroused little in the way of a distinctively Arab response, most deputies focusing on ways of getting the best deal for Arabs within the sultan’s empire. There was no sense at all that these few middle-class voices were speaking on behalf of a swelling

undercurrent of popular feeling. Most Syrians were still content to acknowledge Abdulhamid's interpretation of the sultanate as the expression of Islamic identity.

Nevertheless, the increasing bankruptcy of the Ottoman state towards the end of the nineteenth century combined with the depression that severely affected prices for grain increased the dissatisfaction felt by the Arab population of the eastern provinces. The modernisation process was costly but the coffers were increasingly empty. This 'crisis of legitimacy' worsened after 1908 as the Young Turks, after initially embracing a continuation of Abdulhamid II's policy of a Turkish–Arab compact, moved towards a new more distinctly Turkish and secular destiny.³⁸ The imposition of Turkish as the medium of education and administration signalled the end of the old policy of flexibility.

It was one thing to be part of the broad spectrum of the varied domains of a sultan who, however autocratic, respected the traditions the empire embraced. It was quite another to be a lost corner of an empire that was struggling to retain any coherence outside an increasingly mono-cultural Turkey. Arab nationalism flared with a new intensity but only during the short period between the restoration of parliamentary government in 1908 and the First World War. The old elite still clung to loyalty to Ottomanism. There was no program to seek independence from the empire; the emphasis was rather on restoring Arab language and cultural rights within it. Moreover, while the heart of the new movement lay in Damascus, the centre of Arabism, its political environment was usually too restrictive and many activists preferred to operate from the more liberal climes of Cairo or Europe.

The privations and uncertainty of the war inflamed feelings that the Arabs were paying a higher price in the struggle than most inhabitants of Anatolia and that they were simply left to their own devices in the face of famine and rampant disease. Jemal's efforts to foster a common Islamic identity (ironically with the support of the Germans) came to naught against the reality that the Syrian economy was run into the ground to support the war effort and any local unrest was met with a massively disproportionate response. The dynastic ambitions of Sharif Hussein of Mecca (later King of the Hijaz 1916–1924), sporadically fanned by the British, diverted Arab nationalist feeling away from liberal urban-based nationalism. That support for an Arab identity, however, did not translate into widespread enthusiasm for the Hashemite cause, although Hussein's son, Feisal, had some initial success in 1915 in contacting the Arab secret societies in Damascus, thus arousing Jemal's harsh repression of Arab nationalism. Turkish oppression and incompetence during the course of the war did the rest. What had, in 1914, been a small spark fanned by a few enthusiasts became in four years an idea whose day had come, a concept enthusiastically adopted by the city's elite if it could be diverted to advance their own as opposed to the Hashemites' ends.

'To Damascus!' – the great ride

In the summer of 1918, down on the plain between Lodd and the hills rising to Jerusalem, an army was being assembled by the newly appointed Allied commander,

General Allenby, for a concerted drive to remove the Turkish Empire from Syria. Perhaps the most motley invasion force Damascus had ever faced, the troops comprised Indians, Jews, Armenians, with elements from England, Scotland, South Africa and the West Indies. The shock element was drawn from Australian forces that on 31 October 1917 had swept into Beer Sheba with astonishing success, the last great mounted charge in the history of warfare. Jerusalem had fallen in December 1917, clearing the way for a final push to expel the Turks from Syria.

The Australians were themselves a motley crew of improvised units including a Camel Corps and a Mounted Division (light horse units pressed into service as cavalry). The 12,000-strong Australian force took the Turkish command centre at Nablus (September 1918) before continuing north. To the east, the Arab Legion, raised by T.E. Lawrence, was charged with sweeping up the Hijaz Railway to join the allies at Dera'a and form the right flank for the entry to the main objective, Damascus, which had to fall before the rains arrived in November.

After smashing the weak and demoralised Turkish line, the Allied force reached their first destination, Afuleh, on the Plain of Esdraelon. The German commander of the Turkish forces, Liman von Sanders, was surprised in Nazareth by the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars but managed to escape by car to Tiberias. The Turkish forces, however, crumbled under the speed of the Allied advance that swept into Jenin on 21 September. When the Australians, under the command of General Harry Chauvel, reached the Bridge of Jacob's Daughters on the upper Jordan, the Turkish commander, Mustafa Kemal, was barely minutes ahead of them but managed to get to Damascus before detection.³⁹ German gunners put up a fierce resistance, dismantling the medieval bridge to improve their defences. The next morning, however, the Turkish and German forces had gone, opening the way for the Allies' ascent to Quneitra on 29 September, skirting well to the south of the great Mamluk fortress at Subeibe that had long guarded this traditional gateway to Damascus. After an engagement outside Quneitra, the Australians found themselves on the flat rocky uplands with little to stop their advance on Damascus 60 kilometres away. They 'rode with the bursting excitement of a throng of school-boys. Their blood tingled with the sheer joy of their gallop to victory', in the words of their official history, underlining the excitement which the call 'to Damascus' evoked even on the other side of the world.⁴⁰

The Damascus which Mustafa Kemal had briefly transited was in chaos. The city had long been abandoned by Jemal who had returned to Istanbul after the fall of Jerusalem. Kemal too realised that the defence of Damascus was impossible and decided to make his stand near Aleppo. What disciplined units of the Turkish forces remained prepared for full flight north, determined to make their way back to Anatolia and save their strength for the defence of the homeland. 'The town knew that each hour was bringing closer the rolling boom of the cannon and the sound and dust of the horsemen'.⁴¹ The Turks were blaming the Germans and the Arabs were blaming both, especially after the savage reprisals which Lawrence's units had committed on the Turkish forces responsible for the slaughter of the Arab inhabitants of Tafas, north of Dera'a. The Turkish leadership and many of

its forces had fled Damascus before 30 September, encouraged by a group of Arab notables who feared that the Turks, in the face of final defeat, might put the city to the torch. An Arab administration was hastily appointed as Turkish civil authority crumbled. Once again, however, the population had already scented that a new era was upon it. Feisal's agents ensured that flags were unfurled heralding the would-be king of Syria whose forces Lawrence led.⁴² The Germans and Turks fought over getaway vehicles while the agents of Feisal sought to prepare the way for Feisal's triumphant entry into the city.

For the first time in over a thousand years, Damascus anticipated the proclamation of an Arab victory. However fragile its sense of Arab nationalism had been until the closing stages of Turkish rule, it now quickly embraced its Arab identity in spite of many reservations about its Hashemite proponents. One small detail marred the triumph. The Australians' momentum swept them up to the gates of the city while the Arabs were still many kilometres to the south. On 30 September a group of Australians and French, having skirted west around a Turkish defensive position at Kawkab, had taken Mezze and descended on a fleeing convoy of Turks entering the Barada Gorge en route to Beirut. Those Turks who were not killed in their hundreds by the Allied forces were set upon by the hostile Damascenes harrying the stragglers.

The Australians bivouacked for the night at Dumar. Lawrence's forces, however, were still coming up from the south and it was the Australians who rode into the city next day (1 October). The plan had been to encircle the city particularly to cut off any escape routes to Beirut or Homs, reflecting Allenby's orders (issued at Quneitra on 29 September) not to enter the city unless tactical reasons required it. Given the difficulties of keeping forces together as they negotiated the difficult country to the north and west, it now made better sense to the local commander to deploy the Tenth Australian Light Horse Regiment straight through the city to see what resistance might be encountered.⁴³ There was none. The horsemen, exhausted after their long ride up from the plains of Palestine, still managed a dashing profile with their swords and up-turned brims of their hats, plumed with emu feathers. Setting out before dawn, they approached the city across the slopes of modern Abu Roumaneh. Their steady trot suddenly increased to a gallop. 'With drawn swords, (they) dug in their spurs and the horses, manes flowing, rushed forward towards Damascus', wrote the daughter of one of the participants.⁴⁴ It was an invasion staged through sound effects rather than force of arms: clattering across the cobblestones and tramlines, the lightly armed horsemen were impressed by the rising din of their hoofbeats punctuated by the last explosions from the Germans' ammunition depots. At dawn, they reached the old Mamluk exercise field, the Midan al-Akhdar, as the Turks emerged from sleep at the Hamidiye Barracks to the realisation that their retreat was cut off. Twelve thousand or more Turkish foot soldiers knew they were abandoned and resistance was minimal.

The original plan for the taking of Damascus was to be stage-managed to accommodate Lawrence's forces who were still coming up the Dera'a road. The symbolism of taking the city's surrender was the political trump card, sought by the British,

the French and Feisal in the game that was developing for the control of Syria. The Australians' élan had spoilt it all. Never mind; the acting commander of the Tenth Light Horse Regiment, Major Arthur Olden, pressed on north over Victoria Bridge and headed along the Barada towards the Turkish Seraya, just west of Merdje Square, where 'huge cosmopolitan crowds were rushing about cheering and firing rifles' though it was only 6.30 a.m.⁴⁵ There Olden found the Ottoman governor, Amir Sa'id al-Jeza'iri, appointed only the day before, presiding. A grandson of the Algerian exile, 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jeza'iri, Amir Sa'id was maintaining the great family tradition of stepping in during times of crisis to preserve law and order. Olden was embarrassed to find Amir Sa'id eager to offer the city's dignified surrender. Olden later professed he awkwardly cut short the flowery Arabic welcome speech to explain that the British commander would soon arrive for the formal ceremony.⁴⁶ Amir Sa'id assigned a squad of gendarmes to guide the Light Horse unit around the city to the north. The Australians were received by the crowd on leaving with hysterical manifestations of relief. The people of Damascus 'expressed their great joy by spraying the troops with champagne, perfumes, rose leaves and confetti'.⁴⁷

The first Australian forces couldn't stay for the triumphal procession the population had in mind. They pressed on with their mission of cutting the escape route to the north, encountering a Turkish blocking force at Khan Qusayr 16 kilometres north-east of Damascus. Later the same morning (1 October), Lawrence (who made light of the Australians' premature arrival in his later account) made a more subdued entry.⁴⁸ Lawrence's contingent rode in behind the Allied 14th Cavalry Brigade, the Arab horsemen 'galloping with wild shouts about the streets, trailing their coloured silks and cottons and firing their rifles, they made a brave display', the Australian official historian laconically observed. Lawrence quickly sought to head off any leadership role for the city's notables and arranged the next day for Amir Sa'id to be replaced by a Hashemite appointee. A second Australian force was introduced later in the day, partly to subdue tensions that had arisen from the presence of Lawrence's forces, including between Bedouin and Druze elements in the city, and partly because the provisional Arab administration had no capacity to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of the population, including the starving and wounded Turkish forces. The Australian general commanding the Allied forces in Damascus, Chauvel, arranged the official procession by Allied troops on 2 October, partly to awe the restive population into accepting that there was a prevailing authority in a city verging on chaos. The formal entry by Feisal and his forces did not take place until the king arrived by train on 3 October from Dera'a. Chauvel gave permission for this third 'victory parade' into the city.⁴⁹

Whose Damascus?

The scramble to take Damascus was more than a squabble for empty prestige. Allenby had been given precise instructions. The initial idea that the Turkish authorities be mandated to continue their administration was ruled out by the swift collapse of the Turkish presence. The second version mandated by London was a

rapid handover to a nominally Arab administration of which the figurehead would be Feisal, an outcome that would usefully deflect France from anything more than an advisory role in the Syrian interior, as well as ensuring there would be no local backlash to the occupation of the city by a non-Arab, Christian power.⁵⁰

The fall of Damascus quickly symbolised the misunderstandings and deceptions over the future of Syria. The first need was to look after the starving civilian population. Supply of what food the region could produce in wartime conditions had been further disrupted by the collapse of Turkish administration and the fighting in the environs of the city. Still suffering the aftermath of the influenza epidemic, and with 20,000 Turkish troops to tend to, many in a deplorable condition, the medical needs were extreme. The city lacked an administration, the Turks having fled and the Hijazis lacking required experience. Those Arab notables who had worked under the Turks were suspect. Amir Jeza'iri was locked up by Lawrence's forces for fear he would mount a counter-rebellion and attempts by Lawrence to appoint an alternative leader greatly added to the tensions in the city.⁵¹

Lawrence had not told Feisal that his ambition to be king of Syria did not accord with the British–French plans to carve Arabistan into Anglo–French protectorates. Feisal's claim to be the liberator of Damascus was to have been the key to his credentials, given that Lawrence was to promote the claim to deflect attention from his own role in the deception practised on the Arabs regarding Allied war aims.⁵² After the Turks agreed to an armistice on 30 October 1918, inland Syria was placed under Arab administration, most of the rest being divided between Britain (Palestine, Trans-Jordan) and France (Lebanon and coastal Syria to Alexandretta). Turkey's role in underpinning Islam was ended with the declaration of Turkey as a secular state (1922) and the abolition of the Ottoman sultanate (1924).

While the allies squabbled over the details of how Feisal might be sidelined, Damascus remained under Arab administration until July 1920. Damascus had always felt ambiguous about Feisal's cause, though recognising the need for a unified front to restore order after the chaos of the collapse of Turkish rule. Tensions between Feisal and the Damascene notables proved destabilising and outside appointees from Palestine or Iraq were regarded with resentment. The notables feared for their continuing influence under an independent Arab kingdom and Feisal failed to build wide support for his 'national principle'. Disease and famine were still widespread and hostility to the continued presence of hangers-on remained unaddressed. The fact that Feisal was prepared to enlist the support of the Zionists in Palestine awakened new scepticism about his pan-Arab credentials.⁵³ Feisal's cause failed to register credibility with any of the main players in the region and he was easily out-manoeuvred by the imperial powers in their efforts at the peace conference at Versailles to forge a new destiny for the Middle East. The inland parts of Syria came under French rule, the promised 'independence' offered by Britain and France proved a fiction for which a League of Nations mandate (1922) provided a fig leaf. Feisal was compensated by the British with Iraq (r.1921–1933). His 'Arab Kingdom' based on Damascus proved to be a mere trifle in the long span of the city's history.

Notes

- 1 Frankel 1997 gives a full account.
- 2 Gilbar in Philipp 1992: 59.
- 3 Schatkowski Schilcher 1985: 217.
- 4 The houses remain, now sliding into gentle decline and serving as an old persons' complex.
- 5 Schatkowski Schilcher 1985.
- 6 Ma'oz 1968: 199, 209, 23123–2, 239.
- 7 Estimates vary widely but there is some consistency in the median figures used in Fawaz 1994: 259–260 and Schatkowski Schilcher 1985: 87–91. A slight rise in the number might be needed to cover refugees from Lebanon who had taken shelter in Damascus before the events.
- 8 Fawaz 1994: 100; 2001: 265.
- 9 Fawaz 1994: 141–142; Ghazzal 1993: 165.
- 10 Schatkowski Schilcher 1985: 102–105.
- 11 Ghazzal 1993: 143.
- 12 On the lives of the Burtons and of Digby, two books by Mary Lovell: 1995, 1998.
- 13 Tristram 1882 (reprint 1992): 606.
- 14 Much of the structure of the old *seraya* appears to have disappeared in a further widening of the avenue during the First World War. The rest was removed during the building of the post-Independence Palace of Justice that now stands on the site.
- 15 For the Mawlawiye sect, see *EI2* 'Maylawiyya' and Lewis 2002: 406. The latter describes them as 'lax and latitudinarian, suspected of Shi'ite tendencies, and of pandering to the Christian and pagan beliefs and practices that had lingered among the common people'. A reconstructed version of the complex lies behind a wall on Sharia Nasr, immediately north-west of the Hijaz Station (Map 3).
- 16 See Stefan Weber 2009 vol 1: 114–170 for a detailed account of the development of this area.
- 17 Khairallah 1991: 79.
- 18 The extension of the line to Mecca was never built. Tourret 1989; Zaid on 'Hidjaz Railway' in *EI2* for best summaries of the construction and operation of the line.
- 19 Weber 1999a.
- 20 Pascual in Raymond 1980: 33; Porter 1855 I: 138–139; Schatkowski Schilcher 1985: 3–6; Weber 1999a: 100. Ghazzal 1993: 45 figures are different.
- 21 Dettmann 1969: 222.
- 22 Weber 2000: 249 points out that the decision to give major bazaar areas, including the Suq al-Hamidiye, their characteristic curved tin roofs was taken as a precaution after a serious fire in 1912. The iron roofs were partly removed during the First World War to provide the Turkish authorities with material for water tanks and later replaced. Dettmann 1969: 233 n.50. On the long process of building the gallery of shops, see Weber 2009 I: 185–201.
- 23 Weber 2000: 249.
- 24 From the 1940s, the textile zone also moved into the intervening Hariqa quarter which was rebuilt on modern planning lines after the French Mandate authorities bombarded the western part of the old city in 1925. Dettmann 1969: 245–247.
- 25 Weber 1999b: 734.
- 26 On recent work to restore many of the better examples of domestic architecture see Keenan's study of Damascus houses – Keenan 2000.
- 27 Morgenthau 1918: 112, 114. Jemal was assassinated in 1922 in Tbilisi by an Armenian hit squad in the light of his part in the expulsion and massacre of Armenians from eastern Turkey – Rustow 'Djemal Pasha' in *EI2*.
- 28 The results are most spectacularly displayed today in the State Museums of Berlin. Quotes from Hitti 1951: 698.
- 29 Wiegand's letters home were later published by his son but his account of Jemal's decision to create the new Command gives few clues as to its origins – Wiegand 1970:

- 198–200. Jemal made no mention of the decision in his memoirs of the period – Djemal Pasha: 1922. The biography of Wiegand by Watzinger attributes the establishment of the Kommando to German concern that the Turks be encouraged to adopt a program for the protection of monuments, both from the effects of the war and from stone-robbing – Watzinger 1944: 278–280, 289. See also Kayali in Philipp and Schaebler 1998: 296; Sack 1989a: 473.
- 30 The study of Damascus began in January 1917. In spite of the withdrawal of German staff from Damascus during 1917, the program continued until December largely, according to Wulzinger, because the completion of the 1:2000 map of the city was considered an important military asset. Watzinger and Wulzinger were finally given access to the Citadel just before their departure. Wiegand himself withdrew once Jerusalem fell to allied forces – Watzinger 1944: 299, 318–320.
- 31 Watzinger 1944: 318.
- 32 Kayali 1997: 193; Rustow ‘Djemal Pasha’ in *EI2*.
- 33 Dadrian 2002; Kayali 1997: 194. Morgenthau’s figure (1918: 206) for the total number driven to their doom was 1,200,000 based on consular and missionaries’ reports. On Jemal’s policy, Djemal Pasha 1922: 239–302.
- 34 Kayali 1997: 200.
- 35 Jemal quotes from Kayali in Philipp and Schaebler 1998: 302. See also Watzinger 1944: 300.
- 36 Watzinger 1944: 300.
- 37 Sack 1989a: 476.
- 38 Schilcher in Philipp and Schaebler 1998: 101.
- 39 Ironically, many of the Australians had encountered Mustafa Kemal before. He had led the successful Turkish defences at Gallipoli in 1915 against the assault by Allied forces. In 1922, Mustafa Kemal seized power and declared an end to Ottoman rule. He would become known as ‘Father of the Turks’ (Ataturk).
- 40 Gullett 1923: 747.
- 41 Hamilton 2002: 162.
- 42 Gullett 1923: 758.
- 43 War Diaries of the Australian Tenth Light Horse Regiment – Australian War Memorial item nos 10/15/39–40, entries for 30 Sep, 1 Oct 1918. The later Australian official history by Gullett reflects the orders from the ‘political’ level to leave the honours of taking the city to Lawrence’s forces, but this may have been less clear on the ground. Once the idea of skirting the city to the north-west quickly proved impossible, the Australians remained conscious that the public honours should go to the Arab forces. Lawrence sought to write the Australians’ out of a role in the taking of Damascus in an anonymous article for the (*London Times*, 17 Oct. 1918) but later amended this version of events in *Seven Pillars* (Lawrence 1935: 643). For further background, Hill 1978: 174–189; Hughes 2005; Wilson 1989: 561–564. I am indebted to James Barr for retrieving the Lawrence article and for his helpful clarifications on a number of points on which the narrative during these heady days in Damascus was unclear.
- 44 Hamilton 2002: 167.
- 45 War Diary, ALH 10, 1 Oct 1918.
- 46 Olden 1921/2009: 279.
- 47 War diary, ALH 10, 1 Oct 1918 page 3.
- 48 Lawrence 1935: 644–645.
- 49 Gullett 1923: 763–770. The 1918 taking of Damascus has since been the subject of many legends and disputes, including later allegations from Lawrence that the Australians had deliberately ignored the plight of the Turkish prisoners in the Hamidiye Barracks, improvised as a hospital. In fact, though it took some hours to organise medical assistance, the confusion in the barracks with wounded dispersed among 12,000 prisoners of war, initially obscured the gravity of the problem. Conditions were not helped by the chaos that Lawrence’s forces unleashed in taking action against the townspeople, requiring Allied troops to intervene to restore order. Total Australian casualties in the taking of Damascus

were 21 killed and 71 wounded. However, 135 Australians victims of the 1918 campaign are buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery at Mezze Extension, Damascus (statistics at www.cwgc.org), indicating that the greater number died from the privations of the campaign and the level of disease in the city in October 1918.

- 50 Fromkin 1989: 335. A special flag had even been devised personally by British Foreign Secretary Sykes: the black, green, red and white ensign that still forms the basis for the flags of most states of the Arab League – Fromkin 1989: 315, 334.
- 51 In Hughes' account (2005: 96–97), Lawrence took the opportunity of a threatened 'counter-revolution' to have the *amir's* Damascene supporters despatched by machine gun.
- 52 Hill 1978: 185.
- 53 Khoury 1983: 85.

16

EPILOGUE

Countdown to catastrophe (1919–2011)

The first edition of this book ended with the following summing up the picture at the end of 1918 when the first edition concluded its account:

While the allies squabbled over the details of how Feisal might be sidelined, Damascus remained under Arab administration until July 1920. Damascus had always felt ambiguous about Feisal's cause though recognising the need for a unified front to restore order after the chaos of the collapse of Turkish rule. Tensions between Feisal and the Damascene notables proved destabilising and outside appointees from Palestine or Iraq were regarded with resentment. The notables feared for their continuing influence under an independent Arab kingdom and Feisal failed to build wide support for his 'national principle'. Disease and famine were still widespread and hostility to the continued presence of hangers on remained unaddressed. The fact that Feisal was prepared to enlist the support of the Zionists in Palestine awakened new scepticism about his pan-Arab credentials.¹

Feisal's cause failed to register credibility with the main players in the region and he was easily out-manoeuvred by the imperial powers in their efforts at the peace conference at Versailles to forge a new destiny for the Middle East. The inland parts of Syria came under French rule, and the promised 'independence' offered by Britain and France proved a fiction for which a League of Nations mandate (1922) provided a fig leaf. Feisal was compensated by the British with Iraq (r.1921–1933). His 'Arab Kingdom' based on Damascus had proved a mere trifle in the long span of the city's history.

1919

Few states that emerged from the embers of the First World War faced a greater level of disruption than that which confronted Syria in 1919. This supplementary

review of the last Syrian century will avoid an exhaustive account likely to lose the reader in the thickets of a tangled undergrowth. Nor will it adequately address the question of how Syria has ended up in the present tragic conflict of unprecedented proportions lasting already seven years at time of writing. It will seek, however, to pick up some of the strands in the context of a history which warrants a perspective in the '*longue durée*'.

The state which emerged in the 1920s broadly occupied the territory known as Syria since the Assyrians 2,600 years ago set up their province 'across the river' (Euphrates). Only Egypt could match Syria's sense of a common identity. Syria's mix of peoples, however, remained heterodox and its confessional break-up gave no single answer to the question: Who is a Syrian? The issues were particularly complicated given that the European victors in the war had already made promises that assigned parts of Greater Syria to their favoured supporters. The three key documents prescribing new plans for the region were Britain's commitment of support for Feisal and his dream of an Arab Kingdom,² the Sykes-Picot agreement (May 1916) which insouciantly drew lines to divide the map between British and French spheres of influence (Figure 16.1)³ and the Balfour letter (2 November 1917) from the British foreign secretary to the Zionist leaders in the UK which partly compromised the earlier commitments by promising a Jewish 'homeland' as an undefined enclave in historical Palestine.⁴

The fate of the Ottoman provinces in the Levant was thrashed out at a series of conferences and treaties in the period 1919–1922, beginning with the Versailles Conference. The agreements set up a system of Mandates through the League of Nations. In fact, the League, let alone the people of the states themselves, had little say in the process that set the new arrangements in place. Under pressure from France, Britain quietly let France sideline the Arab Kingdom declared by Feisal following the taking of Damascus. On 24 July 1920, French and Arab forces clashed at Maysaloun west of Damascus, resulting in a resounding defeat for Feisal's troops.

There were other complications resulting from differences between the Allies themselves. The French, for example, seemed inspired by a dream to recreate links supposedly forged in the Crusader period with a section of the Eastern Christians, the Maronites. In 1920 the French high commissioner in Syria, Henri Gouraud, took the opportunity of the uncertain environment to award the Maronites a Lebanese state. To their heartland in the central Lebanon, Muslim majority areas were added as economic buffer zones including the Beqa'a, Tripoli and the coastal region south of Beirut.

The hesitant rise of Arab nationalism in the short years before World War One meant that looking back from the perspective of the post-war years, much of what the Ottomans had achieved was seen in a less favourable light. It might have been to the Arab world's advantage, however, if Syrians had longer to adjust to a new era. Losing a capricious ruler like Abdulhamid or the wanton brutality of the Turkish janissaries had its advantages but everything suddenly became much more complicated when there was no Sultan-Caliph to impose lofty solutions for intractable problems.

In fact, the pace of imposed 'modernisation' which had so fascinated some late Ottoman sultans slackened under the Mandate. Most of the new avenues, railways



FIGURE 16.1 The Sykes-Picot territorial division 1916

and tramways, electrification, hospitals, new barracks and administrative buildings had been built under the Ottomans.⁵ The French introduced new styles in domestic buildings and the European fascination with the ‘garden city’. West of the Turkish administrative quarters, a more spacious city extension continued the spread westwards which had begun under the Mamluks. Execution of the plan began with the impressive ‘*étoile*’ street pattern which still provides the agreeable environment of Abu Rumaneh on the north bank of the Barada. Work began in 1925 on a new parliament building to enshrine the initial steps towards democracy but it stalled for the next 30 years.

Probably more than most colonised people, Syrians were at best confused by, or at worst detested, French rule. Though some communities benefitted – many Christians and the Sunni business elites saw the advantages of economic ties to

France – the disadvantages were evident to the greater part of the Arab population. Syria was administered as if it were an extension of the French colonial empire in North Africa. Arabic learning was downplayed in favour of French and one of the most sophisticated cultures of the Arab world was made to feel second rate. Thankfully, some French scholars saw the past differently and the beginnings of a study of the country's Islamic and more ancient traditions made considerable headway during the 20 years of the Mandate, making Syria better known to a wider scholarly audience – a tradition carried on today by the network of French institutes for the study of the Near East (IFPO).

With a contradictory thought process behind the claim for a mandate based on a revival of crusading history, it was no wonder that French policy in Syria was 'schizophrenic' (in Philip Khoury's words).⁶ The path to self-government followed a series of manoeuvres dependent not just on an inconsistent internal political dialogue but in reaction to often chaotic outside events which lay beyond the Mandate authorities' control, including changes of government in Paris. Policy making veered sometimes towards the left where socialists were more inclined to view the Mandate with a less sentimental (even anti-colonialist) eye but more often pulled back in response to the religious right, still burdened by the humiliation of the Crusades.

The last chapter noted that a local reflection of the nationalism evident in nineteenth century Europe had been barely visible in Syria before 1908. After 1918, the flicker of a nationalist awakening was fanned into life again by the role of the largely landed elite elements that began to bid for office under the Mandate. The nationalist spirit that had rallied around Feisal's short-lived 'Kingdom of Syria', proclaimed at a Syrian National Congress in March 1920, was carried forward in the People's Party, headed in 1924 by the aristocratic Jamil Mardam Bey. French officials shut their eyes to the growing strength of nationalism which their own policies were inadvertently fostering and often preferred to restrict their fraternal contacts to those who 'think in French', notably the Uniate Christians.⁷

1925

In Damascus, French rule was initially met with relatively little resistance in the early years of the Mandate. Aleppo was more exposed to agitation that arose from the territorial disputes in northwest Syria and along the coast.⁸ By 1925, however, it was Damascus which provided a more dramatic stage for confrontation. The background was the consistent demands by nationalists that what was left of Syria should remain a unitary state in response to French efforts to fragment it into statelets – Lebanon, Jebel Druze, the Alawi mountains of the coast, even for a time north and south Syria (Aleppo and Damascus). All of these attempts to favour certain communities by creating ethnic or confessional enclaves simply aroused more hostility, not least among minorities themselves. The idea of a state for all citizens came under further pressure as a result of minority refugees fleeing disturbed post-war conditions in neighbouring countries – 40,000 Armenians from Turkey

(displaced by the events at the end of the First World War and even into the 1930s), Syrian Orthodox, Kurds fleeing Kemalist imposition of a program of Turkification, 'Assyrian' Christians escaping Iraq in 1933. The final affront to Syrians was the deal which delivered Antioch (renamed Hatay) to Turkey just before the Second World War, bringing another wave (50,000) of refugees into Syria.⁹

The first local reaction to these attempts to divide often brought provocative and harsh responses, notably when Jebel Druze (Hauran) rose in revolt in June 1925. Within weeks the insurgency had spread to Damascus and gained the support of non-Druze nationalists. They held out in the old city and in the Midan for several weeks. After one wing of the 'Azem Palace was ransacked and burnt by rebel forces, the old city and the Midan were bombarded by French forces for over 48 hours to drive out the rebels.¹⁰ Loss of civilian life was estimated at more than 1,400.¹¹ Later the city was encircled with a 'ring of steel' as French forces sought to recover the Ghouta and the Druze capital, Suweida.¹² By September, many parts of the country were aflame and earned the description of the 'Great Revolt', drawing in all confessions and most ethnic groups. It took two years and the deployment of 50,000 French troops before the conflict in all regions was stamped out.

One result of the experience for the French was that it drove home their failure to read the public mood. In 1928, a Constituent Assembly was elected to prepare



FIGURE 16.2 Syria under the French Mandate

a new constitution. The process, however, was soon suspended. When resumed in late 1931, with six 'basic laws' which protected French interests, France was careful to stack the electoral lists with sympathetic candidates.

The election of a leftist government in France under Edouard Herriot in May 1932 brought another swing back to accommodation with the nationalist forces in Syria. However, it failed to find any basis for agreement when a proposal emerged for a Syrian/French treaty to accompany the new constitutional arrangements. As popular hostility to the French spread, a general strike in January 1935 was supported by the nationalist movement, the Bloc. The election in France of a Socialist government under Albert Surraut brought a new cabinet in Syria with greater nationalist representation under Mardam Bey as prime minister. Though agreement was reached on a treaty with France, reincorporating the Alawite and Druze states, the treaty proposal was scuppered at the end of 1938 when the French parliament foreshadowed further changes and Mardam Bey's government refused to accept any amendments. The government itself resigned two months later.

1940

At the outbreak of World War Two, French policy in Syria had explored numerous conceivable dead ends but failed to find a consistent path. The nationalist forces too had disintegrated into several factions, allowing themselves to be manipulated or played off against each other by the French. The course of the war was now to take that decision-making process out of French and Syrian hands. By 1940, the fall of France to Nazi Germany left Syria with a pro-Vichy administration. The decision of the Vichy commander, Henri Dentz, to allow refueling of German planes transiting Syria on their way to participate in the Anglo-Iraq conflict of May 1941 was a turning point. Its effect, moreover, was amplified by the new strategic picture in the Eastern Mediterranean. The fall of Crete to German forces the same month presented the Allies with the need for a quick decision. Either Syria could remain as a thorn in the Allies' side or it could become their asset.

Transforming Syria into an asset required two things – expelling the pro-Vichy French and gaining the support of the Syrian people. The first was relatively easy. Allied forces raised in Egypt were deployed to Syria and Lebanon on 8 June 1941. Damascus was the first capital to fall on 23 June after limited resistance by the Vichy forces. Lebanon was a little harder but Australian troops were in Beirut by 9 July and two days later Dentz sued for peace. General de Gaulle soon arrived and preempted any thought that Britain might have had about bringing the Mandate to an end and proclaiming independence. He announced his own figurehead appointee as head of state even before Allies had reached a decision on a new administration. De Gaulle was clearly playing his own game but in the end was outfoxed by Churchill. For Britain, Syrian backing for the Allied cause was the priority. Syrian independence was declared as the Allies' aim by 1943 and implemented by 1946.

The National Bloc had emerged victorious in national elections and Shuqri al-Quwatli was appointed president with his long-standing rival Mardam Bey as

prime minister. This confluence of the two parties, the Bloc and the League of National Action (which respectively enshrined the interests of the Ottoman-era landed class and of the rising middle class) jostled for the high ground, leaving the role of opposition to an assortment of leftists (Communists), Muslim Brothers and the party later to sweep them all aside, the Baath. The French, however, still had a familiar card they sought to play, insisting that a French–Syrian treaty be signed before independence. In response to Syrian refusal, France resorted to another over-reaction, shelling and bombing Damascus from the air on 29–30 May 1945.¹³ Again it was Allied pressure which brought the situation back on track but by then some 800 Syrians had died.

The next year France finally granted full independence to Syria and withdrew all its forces. Most countries that achieve independence after a period of foreign rule enjoy at least a cooling off period on liberation. Syria's was excessively short. Too many of the old problems were either unresolved or quickly shot to the surface again. The country had emerged from several break-ups then reconstituted from its component parts, in the process experiencing the painful amputation of two of its coastal regions with devastating effects on the Syrian hinterland and the nation's economy. The inherent talent of Syria's entrepreneurial class had battled a situation where little investment had been directed outside fields essential to French interests. Finally, the politicians failed to develop a coherent centrist force. The old guard, many nurtured in the struggle against the Ottomans, were unable to seize the initiative in a post-independence environment where countering the Mandate was no longer the main challenge.

Due to the events in Palestine in the 1930s and 1940s, an emerging new class was already more distinctly pan-Arabist and anti-Zionist but lacked experience in making a state work.¹⁴ Instead, the outsiders who orbited around the political arena who were to emerge as the real foci of enduring power – the army, the Alawites and the Islamist forces. None was a major factor in 1946 but all of them in the coming decades would hold the future of Syria in their hands to the exclusion of other elements of society.

1948

The battle for Palestine in 1948 came only two years into the Syrian state's existence. Many of its deficiencies were quickly tested. Its newly formed armed forces were weak – French units of 30,000 men had been scaled down to 7,000. Syrian President Quwatli preferred by instinct to stay out but finally conceded by sending in a force of 4,500 to secure Arab-majority parts of northern Palestine.¹⁵ Syrian forces initially took Samakh at the southern end of Lake Tiberias from defenders largely drawn from the local kibbutzes. The Syrian campaign was abruptly halted, however, with the arrival of conventional Israeli units. The Syrians were forced to make a humiliating retreat;¹⁶ so humiliating that the reaction in Damascus saw the resignation of the defence minister, the chief of staff and the two brigade commanders. After a few further smaller encounters north of the lake, Syria's war for

an Arab Palestine was over. The catastrophic consequences of the Israeli attacks on Arab communities across Palestine were evident in the 700,000 refugees streaming towards neighbouring Arab countries, including Syria.

In 1949, Syrians were already identifying with the Palestinian cause not only as an anti-Zionist struggle but as a reflection of the rise in earlier decades of frustrated pan-Arab aspirations which had formed in the aftermath of the Ottoman collapse. Both these dimensions were to be met by the fumbling responses of the young state's civilian government that had formed around the National Bloc. The first native administration that had ruled Syria for nearly a thousand years had failed the challenge.

The Bloc had failed to arouse popular enthusiasm for the country's rulers, even in the euphoria immediately following the French departure. A further factor was the rise of the newer groups (army, Alawites, Islamic) mentioned earlier who no longer shared the old nationalist ideals of the privileged class that had emerged in the last days of the Ottomans. The result was that when 1948 caused a welling up of national shame, it was met by a near instantaneous collapse of the forms of civilian authority which had for almost three decades found unity only in opposing French rule.

From 1949 until 1970, Syria passed through successive phases of ten coups, counter-coups and internal 'corrective' interventions. Though its armed forces began as a whittled down version of the Mandate forces, they eventually aspired to fill an obvious gap to a civilian leadership class largely bereft of ideas. Over the next two decades, after experimenting with a succession of ideologies including Baathism, Communism, Nasserism and pan-Arabism 'Syria was on verge of disintegration as an organised political community'.¹⁷

Syrians fairly universally might have been sporadically relieved (if not bemused) at their country's decision to seek a union with Egypt two years after the 1956 Suez Crisis as a way out of their perpetual domestic squabbles. As Syria had found innumerable times in the past 3,000 years, though, Egypt was a world unto itself. It was the classic centralised state defined by the Nile and had little lasting interest in a distant protectorate. The ropes were cut after little more than three years.

To pick up the final strands in this selective survey of the last century, we need to go back a few decades. French recruitment policies for their local-raised army tended to favour minorities, particularly the Alawites, Circassians, Druzes and Christian Arabs. In turn, the Alawites looked to the military as their path out of the endemic poverty the mountain dwellers had experienced across many centuries. The older elements of the National Bloc and its allies left this field to the Baath, whose founders had drawn many of their ideas from Europe of the 1930s, with a vaguely socialist and determinedly secular and pan-Arab agenda. Founded in Damascus in the early 1940s by Michel Aflaq (Greek Orthodox background) and Salah al-Din Bitar (Sunni background), both were thoroughly secular products of the thoroughly mixed Damascus quarter, the Midan.

Alawites, lacking land or the means to achieve higher education, had few other paths to advancement. Their attachment to Baathism was sufficiently established by the mid-1950s to recognise the need to smash the old paradigms in an environment

where external players had constantly tricked Syria into playing their games. The Baath had consistently drawn a reasonable level of support in elections during the 1950s and 1960s, coming in second or third after the People's Party or the remainder of the National Bloc. Its path to power, however, remained primarily the armed forces. The 1963 military coup showed the Baathists' push for secular modernity had a wide range of support from officers within the armed forces including the then head of the Air Force, Hafez al-Assad. The Baathist program had emphasised the nationalisation of major enterprises and land reform. A distinctly Alawite government was installed after another coup in 1966 but over the course of the rest of the decade, more pragmatic Alawite officers led by Assad gradually ousted the more dogmatic 1961 coup leader, Salih Jadid.

The 1967 Mid East war which resulted in Israeli forces taking most of the Golan, from where they were able to peer down into Damascus from Mount Hermon, was a test for the Baathist command which was accused both of abetting Egypt's imprudent taunting of Israel and of failing to hold its ground around Quneitra. Assad held the dual posts of defence minister and head of the Air Force, which had hardly distinguished itself during the six-day conflict. However, Assad confirmed his grip on government and, after a third coup in 1970, launched a 'corrective movement', softening some of the harsher reforms.

1970

After 1970, Syria increasingly took on the apparatus of a one party state under the Baath. Assad slipped into a 'Bonapartist' style of rule: more *raison d'état*, less ideology. External events, however, again monopolised much of the agenda. The 1973 conflict with Israel (launched by Syria and Egypt but which brought another crushing military defeat) and Syria's response to a call by the Maronites of northern Lebanon in 1976 to intervene (to prevent their being overwhelmed in the civil conflict which had broken out the previous year) limited the president's options on the domestic front, while top priority was given to the needs of the military.

The success of Assad's rule was that it was measured and carefully deliberated; neither of which meant it couldn't be cold-blooded, ruthless and took a long time to recognise the errors of followers (including family) who profited from the new system. Assad after 1970 started to end some of the failed policies of Baathism but acted too slowly to stop a slump by the 1980s.

Coming at a time when Syria was experiencing rapid population growth, Syria's major cities like Damascus experienced runaway expansion. The Ghouta, which had once been dotted with small village communities tied to their orchards and fields, were now engulfed with satellite housing schemes bringing ranks of dismal apartment buildings.¹⁸ While the official statistics for Damascus (before 2011) still put the population below two million, the city was also the destination for numerous workers arriving each day from the satellite suburbs.

Baathist rule had achieved much in terms of spreading irrigation and improving infrastructure to aid agricultural production but results were stifled by the

constraints of collectivisation and price control. In Damascus, the city within the walls and its western extensions still managed to maintain much of a traditional feel, partly protected by the ring of 'garden city' suburbs which wrapped around two sides of the walled enclosure. City planning authorities maintained the old Ottoman requirement for the use of the local limestone on building façades which helped soften the impact of development in the inner areas but beyond that the ranks of tombstone-like arrays of 12-storey apartments of poor standard of construction and finish spread relentlessly into the distance.

Independence had brought new proposals to control the flow of city traffic, looping routes around the walls rather than through them. The long-suffering barely two-lane Straight Street necessarily remained the only path that crossed the traditional heart but by the early years of the new century, even that was closed to vehicles (beyond morning delivery arrangements). Many of the first efforts to improve access had hardly improved on the enthusiastic work of Jemal Pasha and the widening of streets for Ottoman tramcars. By the 1980s, though, an outer series of ring roads began to ease the pounding from heavy vehicles in and around the walled city. Moving much of the north-south traffic to the west at least provided breathing space.¹⁹

Studies on new thoroughfares to filter traffic were also made necessary by Syria's application to list the walled city on the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage list. The UNESCO listing in 1979 was an important milestone in developing the city's tourism potential, eventually freeing the city of much of the motorised circulation that had strangled foot traffic. The value of tourism as an economic asset also brought the creation of better mechanisms for researching and renovating buildings that had suffered disuse. Many of the old city's residents had drifted away to avoid the bottlenecks in the narrow laneways, the need for constant repairs and failing water and power services. The city was researched in depth by the Commission for Old Damascus which identified buildings most in need of rescue. After 1980, this store of information did much to inform priorities for the restoration of the numerous old mosques, *madrasas*, houses and bath-houses, now brought back to life; some in the nick of times as many traditional buildings, once exposed to rain, are quickly prone to collapse. By the early 2000s the visitor could move easily around the narrow lanes, though many might not have appreciated the extent to which the city's new economy now depended much more on restaurants and shops for foreigners rather than on a resident population.

By the 1990s, Hafez al-Assad was the state. The Baath had long ceased to be a forum for ideas but became an enforcer for the regime's interests. Power was transmitted through the armed forces and the proliferating number of intelligence agencies. But at the heart of the system was the Assad family. Not only did the inner core around the Assads determine who would rise or fall and control the main instruments protecting the regime but they amassed commercial concessions that buttressed their determination to retain power. When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, the presidency passed smoothly to his son Bashar and with it the structure

that held the regime together. Though the new president introduced limited economic reforms and gave the impression of a man open to change, the support apparatus was as rigid as ever.

Many Syrians had long preferred an Islamic option and rallied to the thinking of the Muslim Brotherhood, a group opposed to the secular state and which sought to enshrine Islamic values in law. The Muslim Brotherhood had been founded in Egypt in 1928. The movement spread to Syria and made minor inroads in the open electoral contests of the 1950s and 1960s, winning barely 6 per cent of seats in the 1961 poll. By the late 1970s, however, the group had found a larger constituency among Syrians who reacted against the harshness and favouritism of Baathist rule. This resulted in open hostilities in 1979 when the Brotherhood mounted a murderous attack on the Aleppo military cadet school, resulting in 83 deaths.

Islamist protests began to break out across the country. The regime responded by declaring support for the Brotherhood a capital offence. The hundreds of arrests indicated the movement's support base was essentially among students, teachers and professionals. By February 1982, the movement judged it had sufficient nation-wide support to mount an open attack on regime targets in Hama, targeting the 'liberation' of Hama as the first step in a nationwide revolt. Assad's forces responded with its policy of exemplary violence, bombarding the Brotherhood's positions in Hama's old city. The Brotherhood was crushed and effectively ceased to play a role in Syrian politics for the next 30 years. The wider lesson for all of the regime's growing list of opponents was not lost and the country lapsed back into a state of shocked quietism.

2011

By 2011 the regime's bastions had been tested over 40 years of Assad rule. The conflict which broke out in Syria in March–April reflected a critical mass of problems which had been building up over many decades – unemployment, especially among youth who had benefitted from expanded educational opportunities but were unable to find jobs; a disastrous drought in many areas of inland Syria but especially in the south; popular realisation that the lifting of restrictions on an open market had been manipulated to feed the kleptomania of many associated with the regime; the fact that people were simply fed up with the resort to repression, even in response to minor provocations. While the protests were seen abroad as a response to the 'Arab Spring', Western governments had little appreciation of the situation on the ground and of the futility of calls for Bashar al-Assad to step down. In the Syrian arena, that could only be an act of self-destruction; calling for it simply deprived those who did so of any constructive role in heading off a deepening conflict. To assume that the demonstrations were another Tahrir Square confrontation that could be channeled towards democratic reform was foolishly optimistic; playing with matches near a petrol canister. The Syrian army was never likely to repeat the role of the Egyptian defence forces in nudging the leadership towards sweeping concessions.

Over the last seven years the conflict has passed through several stages. It began as a widely supported movement spreading north from Dera'a. Within weeks it had attracted the interest of outside elements initially supporting a wide variety of causes but increasingly drawn towards the agenda of Islamist groups sustained by foreign volunteers and funded by outside interests. The regime began to argue that Islamist elements were flooding the country; a not improbable interpretation as it turned out.

As many elements of the moderate opposition fled abroad it was also obvious in stage two that there was no common reading as to what the struggle was meant to achieve. The regime largely held firm, losing only a small proportion of army officers, for example, to the secular opposition. By its third phase, fighting enveloped much of the country but in a sporadic pattern as access to Syria was facilitated by neighbouring states who chose to turn a blind eye towards (or were happy to encourage) the rebel groups' agendas.

The arrival, from Iraq, of so-called 'Islamic State' which took over Raqqa in August 2013 represented a more willfully murderous fourth phase of the conflict and a turning point. ISIS' agenda was so horrific that their elimination had to be the first priority. Within two years, the regime and its backers had regained momentum, while it was also increasingly clear that the Islamist opposition had no chance of achieving any of its goals beyond motivating its failing supporters in a suicidal struggle.

The fifth phase, by late 2017, saw the effective expulsion of ISIS through a motley collection of forces ranging from Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, the United States and its allies, largely through the use of air power. Even the fiercest critics of Assad's rule had begun quietly to accept that the survival of the Syrian state able to control its territory was a more workable option than the anarchy which allowed mindless violence to proliferate.

The sixth (and hopefully last) phase would be a ceasefire and a negotiated end. I close this chapter on the day that Syrian forces regained much of the centre of the city where the disturbance began seven years and four months ago – Dera'a. The war is not entirely over but a mechanism to see it wind down potentially exists.

* * *

In terms of physical recovery, the fabric of Damascus has been less severely damaged than most major cities in Syria and could provide the best platform for revival. The conflict rarely extended into the old city or its historic extensions.²⁰ It most affected the areas beyond the walled city where the villages of the Ghouta have long been swallowed by the city's expansion over the last 100 years. Much of the eastern spread from Jobar (two kilometres north-east of the city walls) to Duma suffered from a relentless pounding only brought to an end in recent months. Other devastated zones include Deraya in the south-west and parts of the southern suburbs, notably the northern section of Yarmuk, the Palestinian quarter on the edge of the Midan.

The best that might be hoped for now would be a ceasefire taking hold across the country based on a government opening up to its citizens' problems. For the rebel groups, continuing to pursue an unwinnable war is not a reasonable option. The regime has held together largely by demonstrating that it is ready to go to any lengths to remain in power. The secular rebels were marginalised early in the conflict. Western backing for the 'Arab Spring' led protesters to expect unquestioning support in an unwinnable struggle.²¹ The Islamists attracted massive foreign financial and material support but have had to recede in the face of conventional forces now able to mount a sustained campaign with Russian and Iranian support, while the Islamists' foreign backers have begun to pull back from the contest. The Islamists and Salafists have probably only demonstrated that their various versions of an Islamic state cannot address Syria's many problems and complexities. One hundred years after the demise of the Sultan-Caliph's 'circle of equity' (page 266), all Syria's experiments with new political models shared a common logic – Syria needed a multi-confessional state; not a winner takes all theocracy.

It has not been the intention of this chapter to argue that the seeds of Syria's present troubles are found solely in the legacies forced on it by outside factors (Turkey, France, Britain, Israel–Palestine fallout, Arab neighbours, the United States, the Salafists' backers in the Islamic states, Iran, Russia). At most critical points since 1946, Syria has made its own choices but too many of the choices were channelled by outsiders' ambitions and Syria had little opportunity to build a state that could better handle (or avoid) crises through its internal machinery.

The first half of these last hundred years had been marked by too many problems saved up and never resolved.²² Syria had another chance to reform its pre-modern structures when independence in 1946, forced on France by its own allies, changed the picture. The first major test came only two years later when Palestine broke apart. There was no time to buttress a system of democratic rule under a government battered by public hostility following its performance on the battlefield. The army acutely felt the national shame. It had to redeem its reputation, in the process spawning a new class of radicalised officers who had no confidence in politicians but soon turned on each other under the pressure of 'praetorianism'.²³ An 'armed parliament' struggled on until the military began to explore Baathism in 1963–1970. But the party, too, failed to achieve a durable structure to pursue its ideals and was sidelined when roles were reversed and it was taken under the military's wing.

Looking back, was 2011 destined to happen? Syria, in terms of benefits to its citizens, had made great strides in agriculture, infrastructure, the spread of universal education. In the race to keep up, however, one factor was overlooked – the division of privileges between top and bottom of the state were as stark as ever. Population pressures have become extreme, many farmers remain dirt poor, parts of the country perennially run out of water; the political elite is remote and the interest group at the top of the pile controls a large proportion of the country's gross domestic product. Educational and land reforms brought a thirst for social change without providing results for more than a favoured few. 2011 brought together this

explosive mixture. The decision to light the match and throw more fuel onto the flames was not inevitable but a conscious choice by several parties. The results have been more murderous than any in the 5,000 or more years of Damascus' existence. At the time of closing this account, the sad fact is that, after 100 years in which numerous outside states were happy to decide what was best for Syria, only a few now seem interested in contributing to finding a way out of this catastrophe.

Notes

- 1 Khoury 1983: 85.
- 2 Correspondence July 1915 to March 1916 between the British High Commissioner in Egypt and Hussein, Sharif of Mecca.
- 3 The terms agreed are given in a letter from the British Foreign Secretary (Grey) to the French Foreign Minister (Cambon) on 16 May 1916. The terms professed to recognise ultimate Arab sovereignty across the whole of Syria and Iraq: 'France and Great Britain are prepared to recognize and protect an independent Arab State or a Confederation of Arab States in the areas (A) and (B) marked on the annexed map, under the suzerainty of an Arab chief... That in the blue area France, and in the red area Great Britain, shall be allowed to establish such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire and as they may think fit to arrange with the Arab State or Confederation of Arab States'. The letter, though, needs to be read in conjunction with the letter from Cambon six days earlier which, Grey noted, 'accept(s) the limits of a future Arab State, or Confederation of States, and of those parts of Syria where French interests predominate'.
- 4 All of these bargaining chips contradicted each other and seem to have been inspired by sudden enthusiasms on the part of their sponsors. Fromkin describes Sykes as 'a mercurial personality who remained subject to sudden enthusiasms' – 1989: 319.
- 5 McHugo 2014 notes France's disproportionate spending on security and the military ruled out new capital expenditure. After 1926, one third of tax receipts within the Mandate was allocated to security. He also notes the lack of interest in Syria by French investors, thus casting doubt on French assumptions of an abiding interest in the region.
- 6 Khoury 1987: 45.
- 7 Khoury 1987: 69–71.
- 8 Burns 2017: 273–277.
- 9 The *sanjak* (province) of Alexandretta comprised a clear majority of non-Turks – Alawites (28 per cent), Armenians (11 per cent), 10 per cent Sunni Arabs, 8 per cent other Christians (1936 figures) – Khoury 1987: 495.
- 10 Khoury 1987: 176–177. The 'Azem complex, as well as serving as headquarters for the French Institut d'Art et d'Archéologie Musulmans, provided in one wing the Damascus domicile of the French commander, Maurice Sarrail. The visiting Frenchwoman, Alice Poulleau, gives a vivid description of the building's 'diabolical and vicious' sacking – 1926: 106–109.
- 11 Khoury 1987: 178 quoting the French Communist newspaper, *L'Humanité* 17 November 1925.
- 12 One result of the clearing of shops and houses for the 'ring of steel' was an inner ring road around the walled city, parts of which had already been defined by late Ottoman road works.
- 13 Khoury 1987: 617; Longrigg 1968: 348.
- 14 Seale 1965: 24 has reminded us that: 'With few well-trying institutions or recognised political traditions to guide them, they were more often engrossed in the trivia of personal rivalry than in statesmanlike acts'.
- 15 McHugo points out that Quwatli's main motivation was the need to outflank any move by Jordan to extend its territory to the Upper Jordan – McHugo 2014: loc.2267.

- 16 Morris 2008: 251–258.
- 17 Seale 1965: 307.
- 18 Virtually all of the villages separately marked on Map 10 had become almost one continuous urban spread with small patches of worked arable land, while the water of the Barada was a resource mainly for the swelling population of the city and suburbs.
- 19 The report by the UNESCO consultant, Stefano Bianco, was critical of the earlier emphasis in Ecochard's 1968 masterplan on the motor car – Bianca 1987: 8: 'this Masterplan, if fully executed, would probably have destroyed the character and unity of the walled city'. One of the main outcomes of Bianca's report was to halt the planned demolition of the Suraja quarter west of the walled city.
- 20 There were isolated incidents involving mortar shells haphazardly lobbed from rebel positions outside the city. The ancient synagogue at Jobar was severely damaged and most of the above-ground structure obliterated as a result of fighting in the area.
- 21 Western minds, fixated by the 'Arab Spring' paradigm, lacked a real appreciation that the Egyptian army's decision not to salvage Mubarak's presidency simply could not be replicated in Syria's environment.
- 22 The British historian John McHugo has rightly noted that the Arab Kingdom that was promised to Feisal in 1915 might have been the last good chance Syria enjoyed to develop its nationhood before it was snuffed out through British and French complicity – McHugo 2014: loc.4406.
- 23 Hinnebusch 2002: 28.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND NAMES

Notes:

- Though some Arabic plural forms are listed, in most cases in the text the plural is formed simply by adding ‘-s’ to the singular form to avoid confusion, especially where the word is in reasonably common use in historical sources – hence, *madrasa*, *madrasas* etc.
- *EI2* indicates corresponding entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition, Leiden, 2003 (WebCD edition)

<i>A</i>		
<i>abu</i>	father of	Arabic
<i>ablaq</i>	use of contrasting layers of black and ochre stone for decorative effect on façades, doorways	Arabic
<i>agha</i> (pl <i>aghawat</i>)	local militia leader, quarter boss	Turkish
<i>ahl</i>	people, family, members of a sworn confederacy – by extension, an army	Arabic
<i>ahdath</i>	urban youth gangs	Arabic
<i>‘ain</i>	see <i>‘ayn</i>	Arabic
<i>‘alim</i> (pl <i>‘ulama</i>)	Islamic religious leader	Arabic
<i>‘Alawi</i> , <i>‘Alawite</i>	followers of a Shi‘ite heterodox sect	Arabic
<i>‘alite</i>	movement of followers of ‘Ali	–
<i>amir</i> (<i>amir al-haj</i>)	commander (commander of the annual pilgrimage), prince	Arabic
<i>atabeg</i>	Seljuk title indicating mentor, high dignitary or commander in chief of an army	Turkish
<i>a‘yan</i> (pl of <i>‘ayn</i>)	notables, prominent figures favoured by Ottomans	Arabic
<i>‘ain</i> (or <i>‘ayn</i>)	spring, source, eye, essence	Arabic

(continued)

334 Glossary of terms and names

(continued)

B		
<i>bab</i>	gate, door	Arabic
<i>bait</i>	house	Arabic
<i>barid</i>	postal service, usually restricted to official mail	Arabic, from Turkish
<i>basha</i>	see <i>pasha</i>	Arabic
<i>bayk</i> (pl <i>bawa'ik</i>)	grain storage depot, usually in the form of a long open hall	Arabic
<i>bedestan</i>	hall lined with shops, each lockable, the common space often covered by domes – see also <i>qaysariye</i>	Turkish
<i>bey</i>	lord (Ottoman title)	Turkish
<i>bimaristan</i>	see <i>maristan</i>	Persian
<i>bin</i>	see <i>ibn</i> ('son of')	Arabic
<i>burj</i>	tower	Arabic
C		
<i>cadi</i>	see <i>qadi</i>	Arabic
Caliph	head of the Islamic community. Abu Bakr was appointed as Mohamed's successor in 632 with the title	Arabic
<i>caravanserai</i>	caravan stop – hostel for travellers with provision for storage of their goods	Persian/ Turkish
<i>castrum</i>	Roman fortress or fortified camp	Latin
<i>cataphracti</i>	Byzantine armoured, mounted forces	Greek
<i>cella</i>	enclosed shrine of a classical temple to which only priests are allowed access	Latin
Coele Syria	literally 'hollow Syria' – originally probably a reference to the region around the indentation of the Beqa'a Valley, later apparently applied to northern Syria	Greek
D		
<i>dar al-'adl</i>	court of justice	Arabic
<i>dar al-'imara</i>	'abode of princes' or princely palace (fr. <i>'amil</i> – 'prince'; pl <i>'ummal</i>)	Arabic
<i>dar al-hadith</i>	school for study of teachings of the Prophet Muhammed	Arabic
<i>darb</i>	path, route	Arabic
<i>daftardar</i>	chief financial official in an Ottoman governorate, usually appointed directly from Istanbul and remaining in office for a long period	Turkish
<i>deir</i>	monastery	Arabic
<i>demos</i>	the people	Greek
<i>derwish</i>	member of a Sufi order, mystic	Persian
<i>dhimmi</i>	non-Muslims from one of the communities of 'the Book' – Christian, Jew, Samaritan	Arabic
<i>diwan</i> (pl <i>dawawin</i>)	(1) office, ministry – integral part of the governor's <i>seraya</i> ; (2) consultative body advising a governor	Turkish/Arabic

Druze	sect which broke away from Isma'ili mainstream under the third Fatimid Caliph, Hakim (r.996–1021); predominant in certain mountainous regions of Syria and Lebanon	Arabic
<i>dux</i>	military commander	Latin
<i>E</i>		
<i>effendi</i>	(originally) scribe or bureaucrat; Ottoman honorific title	Turkish
<i>emir</i>	see <i>amir</i>	Arabic
<i>ethnarch</i>	national or tribal ruler	Greek
<i>F</i>		
<i>fikh</i>	understanding, knowledge – with particular emphasis on jurisprudence	Arabic
<i>firman</i>	Ottoman imperial decree signed by the Sultan	
<i>fondaco</i>	factory, see <i>funduq</i>	Italian
<i>funduq</i> (pl <i>fanadiq</i>)	inn; factory housing merchant and his wares (from Greek <i>pandocheion</i>)	Arabic
<i>furn</i>	bakery, oven	Arabic
<i>G</i>		
Ghassanids	Arab tribal grouping which accepted Christianity and settled within the Roman <i>limes</i> in Syria in the late fifth century	Arabic
<i>H</i>		
<i>hadith</i>	recorded sayings or actions of the Prophet	Arabic
Hajj	annual pilgrimage to Mecca	Arabic
<i>halqa</i>	guard assigned to sultan – Ayyubid	Arabic
Hanafi	one of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence – from teachings of Abu Hanifa al-Nu'man ibn Thabit (d.767) – developed in the mid-eighth century from Basra-Kufa tradition – emphasis on personal reflexion in decisions – favoured by Ottomans	
Hanbali	one of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence – from teachings of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d.855) – most literal and rigorous, emphasis on the Koran and Sunna not speculation or mysticism – in vanguard of Sunni revival in tenth century – particularly strong under Mamluks	Arabic
<i>hamad</i>	sterile, desert land	Arabic
<i>hammam</i>	public steam bath	Arabic
<i>hara</i> (pl <i>harat</i>)	quarter – e.g. Harat al-Jehud (Jewish Quarter)	Arabic
Hijaz	northern Arabia, location of the holy cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina	Arabic
<i>hijra</i>	Muhammed's 'emigration' from Mecca to Medina (AD 622) – start of the Islamic era	Arabic

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<i>hisba</i>	the duty of every Muslim to promote 'good faith and prevent evil' (<i>EI2</i> ' <i>hisba</i> ')	Arabic
I		
<i>ibn</i>	son of (sometimes ' <i>bin</i> ')	Arabic
<i>al-Ikhshid</i>	Fatimid honorific title – 'brilliant, worthy'	Persian
Ikhshidids	Mohammed ibn Tughj al-Ikshid established a short-lived dynasty (935–969) which maintained Damascene independence against the rising power of the Arab principality of the Hamdanids in Aleppo	Arabic/Persian
Ilkhans	Mongol ruling dynasty in Persia, thirteenth to fourteenth centuries	Persian
<i>imam</i>	prayer leader	Arabic
<i>imaret</i>	public kitchen, usually charitable institution	Turkish, from Arabic
<i>iqta'</i>	grant entitling holder of military or administrative office to use tax revenues raised from an estate – unlike European feudalism, no permanent right to ownership of land was conferred	Arabic
Isma'ili	Branch of Shi'a Islam, supporters of the claim of Isma'il, son of Jafar as Sadiq (d.765), to the spiritual leadership of Islam	Persian/Arabic
<i>iwan</i>	room with open side looking onto a courtyard and serving as a space for entertainment or instruction	Arabic, from Persian
J		
<i>jadid</i>	new	Arabic
<i>jami'a</i>	congregational mosque	Arabic
<i>janissaries</i>	Ottoman troops – both locally raised (<i>yerliyya</i>) and Istanbul-based (<i>kapikul</i>)	Turkish
<i>jawali</i>	Islamic poll tax, originally paid by non-Muslims who had migrated to urban areas	Arabic
Jazira	literally 'island' – usually refers to the north-east of Syria between Tigris and Euphrates Rivers	Arabic
<i>jebel</i>	hill or mountain	Arabic
<i>jihad</i>	'effort directed upon oneself for the attainment of moral and religious perfection' – by extension, 'military action with the object of the expansion of Islam' ('Djihad' in <i>EI2</i>)	Arabic
<i>jizya</i>	poll tax paid to state by non-Muslims	Arabic
<i>jund</i> (pl <i>ajnad</i>)	governorate	Arabic
K		
<i>kapikul</i> (pl <i>kapikuli</i>)	Ottoman professional forces rotated from Istanbul (from Turkish <i>qapi gulu</i> – 'slave of the Porte')	Arabic, from Turkish

Karmati (Qarmati, Carmathians)	sect, now defunct, that broke away from the Isma'ili tradition, followers of Hamdam Karmat in late ninth century Bahrein who frequently challenged Fatimid rule in Syria and Iraq	Arabic
<i>karma</i>	band of vine (acanthus and grape) leaves used for decorative purposes and possibly to describe a sacred space (literally 'vine')	Arabic
<i>khan</i> (pl <i>khanat</i>)	depot-hostelry for exchange of goods	Persian
<i>khanqah</i> (<i>khanakah</i> ; pl <i>khawanik</i>)	'monastery' for Sufi mystics, generally stricter than a <i>zawiya</i> and usually named after a benefactor	Arabic, from Persian
<i>kharaj</i> (or <i>kharj</i>)	land tax	Arabic
<i>khatun</i>	'princess', later title of respect for any woman	Kurdish, Arabic
<i>khirbet</i>	ruin	Arabic
Koran (<i>Kur'an</i> (EI2), <i>Qur'an</i>)	Muslim holy scripture as revealed to Muhammed	Arabic
<i>kubbat</i>	see <i>qubba</i>	Arabic
Kurds	people of Iranian origin, inhabiting eastern Turkey, parts of northern Syria and northern Iraq	
<i>L</i>		
<i>limes</i>	areas on the frontier of the Roman and Byzantine Empires	Latin
<i>limitanei</i>	initially frontier forces commanded by a <i>dux</i> ; later locally raised militia often farming frontier land	Greek
<i>M</i>		
<i>madhanat</i>	tower – one of three words used to refer to 'minaret'	Arabic
<i>madhhab</i>	way of thinking, persuasion – four schools of Islamic jurisprudence	Arabic
<i>madrasa</i> (pl <i>madaris</i>)	residential school for Islamic instruction, usually funded by a charitable endowment (<i>waqf</i>)	Arabic
<i>mahmal</i>	palanquin or canopy used to cover the Prophet's grave at Medina, provided each year by the Islamic ruler as contribution to the Hajj and transported by camel	Arabic
<i>majlis</i>	council of representatives, usually of a local character	Turkish
<i>malik</i>	'king' but more commonly used for any governor or prince of the Ayyubid or Mamluk realms	Arabic
Maliki	one of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence – developed in the eighth century from doctrines of Imam Malik ibn Anas (d.795) as an initiative by 'Abbasid	Arabic

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	Caliph al-Mansur to unify Islamic law codes around the consensus and tradition of Medina – emphasis on moderation; opposed to mysticism – strong in Spain and North Africa	
<i>mamluk</i> (pl <i>mamalik</i>)	literally ‘thing possessed’, ‘slave’ – professional soldiers recruited in childhood from marginal lands (initially, Central Asia) and trained to serve a patron	Arabic
<i>mamlaka</i>	royal power, kingdom or governorate	Arabic
<i>makbara</i>	cemetery	Arabic
<i>maqam</i>	foot, mode, measure	Arabic
<i>marj</i>	grazing area on the edge of cultivated land (hence: Merdje Square). Other parts of the Damascus <i>marj</i> are referred to by specific names – e.g. Marj Rahit (northeast of the city – after fourteenth century, Marj al-‘Adra’), Marj al-Suffar (south). These areas often served as rallying zones for invading armies	Arabic
<i>maristan</i>	hospital and medical teaching institution	Arabic
<i>mashhad</i>	‘place of witness’ – shrine (esp in Shi‘ite tradition)	Persian
<i>masjid</i>	mosque, usually smaller, neighbourhood version	Arabic
Mawlawiye (Mevlevi)	Sufi order – followers of Jalal al-Din Rumi (<i>Mawlana</i> – ‘our master’) died Konya 1273 – by reputation, syncretist with inclinations towards Shi‘ism	Arabic/Turkish
<i>metrokomia</i> (pl <i>metrokomiai</i>)	‘mother village’ – large village with supervisory administrative function over its environs	Greek
<i>midan</i> (or <i>maidan</i>)	open area for military training	Arabic
<i>mihrab</i>	niche or alcove in the <i>qibla</i> wall of a mosque indicating the direction of Mecca	Arabic
<i>minbar</i>	elevated chair for preacher, to right of mihrab	Arabic
Mongols	Central Asia group whose original home was in the east of present-day Mongolia – their thirteenth to fourteenth century empire attained its greatest extent under Ghengis Khan	
<i>muhtasib</i>	supervisor of moral behaviour (see ‘ <i>hisba</i> ’), including in markets (<i>EI2</i> ‘ <i>hisba</i> ’)	Arabic
<i>mujahid</i>	warrior in the cause of Islam	Arabic
<i>muqaddam</i>	leader of a militia or armed group	Arabic
<i>muqarnas</i>	three dimensional decoration in Islamic architecture	Arabic
<i>mutasallim</i> , <i>mutasarriif</i>	local official in the Ottoman system, usually ruler of a <i>sanjak</i> (or deputy to a governor of a <i>wilayat</i>)	Arabic/Turkish

N

<i>nahr</i>	river or canal	Arabic
<i>na'ib</i> (pl <i>nuwwab</i>)	'substitute, delegate' – military governor or senior administrative official	Arabic
<i>Na'ib al-Sultana</i>	viceroy – highest administrative official under a sultan	Arabic
<i>Naqshbandi</i> (<i>Nakshbendi</i>)	Sufi order – followers of Bahar al-Din Naqshband (fourteenth century) – by reputation, strict and fanatical	Turkish
<i>nargilla</i> (or <i>narghile</i>)	water pipe for smoking	Turkish
<i>narthex</i>	vestibule stretching across western end of a church	Latin
<i>naufara</i>	spring, water source, fountain	Arabic
<i>noria</i>	wooden waterwheels used to draw water from a stream to irrigate gardens	Arabic
Nusairis	see ' <i>Alawis</i> – followers of a Shi'ite heterodox sect	French

O

Ortuqids	Turkish dynasty which controlled region of Diyarbakir (eastern Turkey) from eleventh to fourteenth centuries	Turkish
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P

<i>pasha</i>	Ottoman title of high rank (in Arabic, <i>basha</i>)	Turkish
<i>peribolos</i>	outer compound surrounding a Greek–Roman temple complex	Greek
Porte	the 'Sublime Porte' was the name of the gateway by which foreign envoys approached the Ottoman court and was often used as a synonym for the imperial administration	French
<i>procurator</i>	agent of the Roman government, especially for financial affairs – also used for official supervising minor provinces where no legions were stationed	Latin
<i>propylaeum</i>	gateway marking entry to a sacred enclosure	Greek

Q

<i>qa'a</i>	formal reception room of an Arab house	Arabic
<i>qadi</i>	judge under Islamic (<i>Shari'a</i>) law	Arabic
<i>qala'a</i> (t)	citadel or castle	Arabic
<i>qanatir</i>	arcade, arches	Arabic
Qarmati	see 'Karmati'	Arabic
<i>qasr</i>	castle or mansion	Arabic
<i>qaysariye</i>	group of shops inside a bazaar complex which can be separately locked – usually for sale of precious items – see also <i>bedestan</i>	Arabic

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Qays	Arab tribe	Arabic
<i>qibla</i>	wall facing the direction of prayer, towards Mecca (in Damascus, south)	Arabic
<i>quadrifons</i>	building with four façades – corner piers, arched open sides, often domed = <i>tetrapylon</i> (Lat)	Latin
<i>qubba</i> (<i>kubbat</i>)	tomb, mausoleum (more commonly, <i>turba</i>)	Arabic
<i>Qur'an</i>	see 'Koran'	Arabic
R		
<i>rabat</i>	see <i>ribat</i>	
<i>ra'is</i> (pl <i>ru'asa'</i>)	leader – e.g. of a local gang or militia; of a village; of a religious community	Arabic
<i>ribat</i> (or <i>rabat</i>)	monastery for Sufi mystics; barracks for men committed to guarding the frontiers	Arabic
<i>riwaq</i>	portico, open gallery, colonnaded space	
S		
<i>sabil</i> (pl <i>subul</i>)	fountain; structure for dispensing water	Arabic
<i>sahn</i>	courtyard	Arabic
<i>salya</i>	salon of a late Ottoman house	Turkish, from French
<i>sanjak</i>	flag, standard; in Ottoman administration, local administrative unit	Turkish
<i>sanjakdar</i>	royal standard bearer	Turkish
Saracens	originally a tribe from the northern Hijaz (Ptolemy <i>Geography</i> 6.7), the term was adopted by the Romans to refer generically to nomadic Arabs	Arabic/Latin
<i>seraya</i>	governor's palace or headquarters	Persian via Turkish
<i>selamlik</i>	public quarters of an Ottoman house	Turkish
Seljuk	Turkish dynasty which reached peak of its power in the eleventh to twelfth centuries in Anatolia and Syria	Turkish
Shafe'i	one of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence – follow teachings of Imam al-Shafe'i (d.820) – opposed to conformism; more emphasis on community consensus, on Sunna – strong in non-Fatimid Egypt and in Syria; the preferred code under the Ayyubids	Arabic
<i>sharaf</i>	'elevated place', (river) 'bank' – 'Upper Sharaf' is the term applied to the higher ground overlooking the Barada from the north, location of present down-town Damascus	Arabic
<i>shar'</i>	street (anglicised as 'Sharia')	Arabic
<i>shari'a</i>	Islamic traditional law	Arabic
<i>sheikh</i>	dignitary or headman; spiritual leader of a group of mystics	Arabic

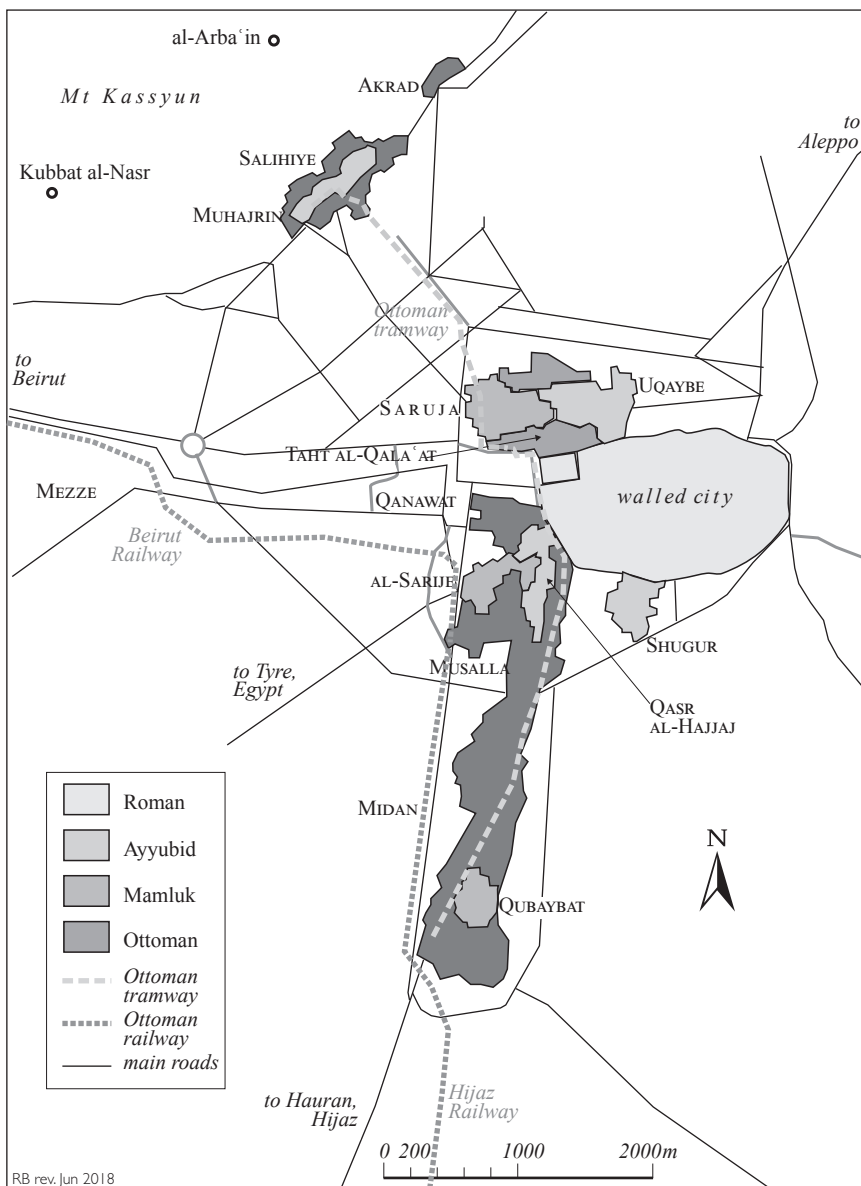
Shi'a (Shi'ites)	movement for the recognition of the claim of the descendants of 'Ali. Originally particularly strong in southern Iraq, Shi'ism became a reaction to the dominance of the Sunni Turkish Seljuks in the 'Abbasid Empire	Arabic
<i>shihna</i>	prefect of a city (Ayyubid)	Arabic
<i>souf</i>	wool	Arabic
Sublime Porte	see <i>Porte</i>	
Sufi	Islamic mystic – sought to establish, through piety and self-denial, personal contact with the Creator – emphasis on <i>gnosis</i> or personal knowledge rather than legal interpretation of the Koran and <i>hadith</i> (<i>EI2</i> 'Tasawwuf')	Arabic
<i>Sunna</i> (hence 'Sunni')	generally approved standard or practice introduced by the Prophet (<i>EI2</i>)	Arabic
suq (<i>suk</i> , pl <i>aswak</i>)	market (see also <i>suwayqa</i>)	Arabic
sultan	a term with various meanings but which implies that a person is appointed by a higher authority to hold temporal power. By Ayyubid times it was fairly loosely used and could be held by several princes simultaneously as a personal title	from Arabic 'salata' – to have power
<i>sultana</i>	administrative district or region, especially under Mamluks	Arabic
<i>suwayqa</i>	small local market for daily needs	Arabic
<i>T</i>		
Tanzimat	literally 'reorganisation' – administrative reforms introduced by the Ottoman authorities between 1839 and 1876 to regularise and centralise the workings of the imperial administration	Turkish
<i>tekkiye</i>	Sufi monastery ('Tekkiye' is used to refer specifically to the major project of Suleiman the Magnificent in Damascus)	Turkish
<i>temenos</i>	inner compound of a Greek-Roman temple, space for performance of outdoor sacrifices	Greek
<i>tetrakionion</i> (pl <i>tetrakionia</i>)	structure allowing four-way passage – e.g. cluster of four plinths supporting columns, usually unroofed; free-standing	Greek
<i>tetrapylon</i>	four-way arch, usually marking crossing point of two routes and joined to structure of colonnades – see also <i>quadifrons</i> and <i>tetrakionion</i>	Greek
<i>trébuchet</i>	siege engine – catapult for launching missiles	French
<i>turba</i>	mausoleum, tomb chamber, usually domed	Arabic
Turkic	language family of Turkish-speaking people	Turkish

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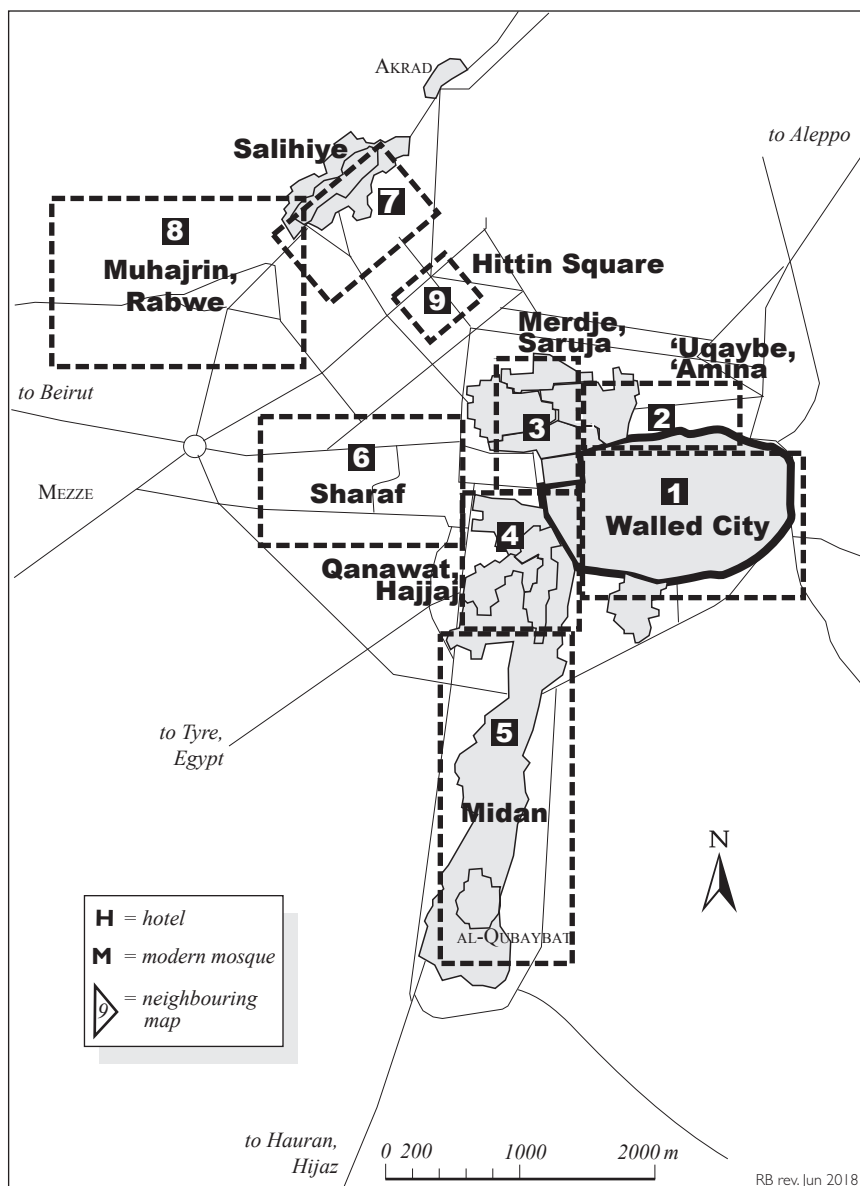
Turkoman	‘Turkic tribes distributed over much of the Near and Middle East and Central Asia from mediaeval to modern times’ (‘Türkmen’ in <i>EI2</i>)	Turkish
Turks	people of Central Asian origin who moved into Anatolia and parts of Syria and Iraq from the ninth century; Turkish-speaking inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire and its successor	Turkish
<i>U</i>		
‘ulama	Islamic religious leadership	Arabic
umm	mother of	Arabic
umma	community of believers (in Islam)	Arabic
ustadar	major domo, head of household	Arabic
<i>V</i>		
vālī	see <i>wālī</i>	Turkish
vexillation	Roman military unit grouped under their own <i>vexillum</i> (‘flag, standard’) but smaller than a legion	Latin
vezir	governor (cf <i>wazīr</i>) – see <i>wālī</i>	Turkish
vilāya	see <i>wilāya</i>	Turkish
voussoir	stone forming segment of an arch	French
<i>W</i>		
Wahhabis	Islamic fundamentalist sect in Arabia	Arabic
wālī	‘governor’ – responsible for civil administration	Arabic/Turkish
waqf (<i>wakf</i> , pl <i>awaqf</i>)	endowment tying income from a business enterprise to support of a religious, charitable or educational institution	Arabic
wazīr	Ottoman rank usually corresponding to the status of a governor	Arabic/Turkish
wilāya (pl <i>wilayat</i>) or <i>vilāya</i>	governorate (Mamluk, Ottoman)	Arabic/Turkish
<i>Y</i>		
Yamani	Arab tribe of south-west Arabian origin	Arabic
yerliya	Ottoman local forces, often hired from among descendants of janissaries (Turkish <i>yerli</i> = ‘local’)	Arabic/Turkish
<i>Z</i>		
zakat	Islamic tax, a levy of capital to provide alms; major source of revenue	Arabic
zawiya (pl <i>zawayas</i>)	Sufi hospice – informal school for Islamic studies, usually named after the <i>sheikh</i> whose followers gathered there	Arabic
zuqaq	lane	Arabic

MAPS OF CITY AND ENVIRONS

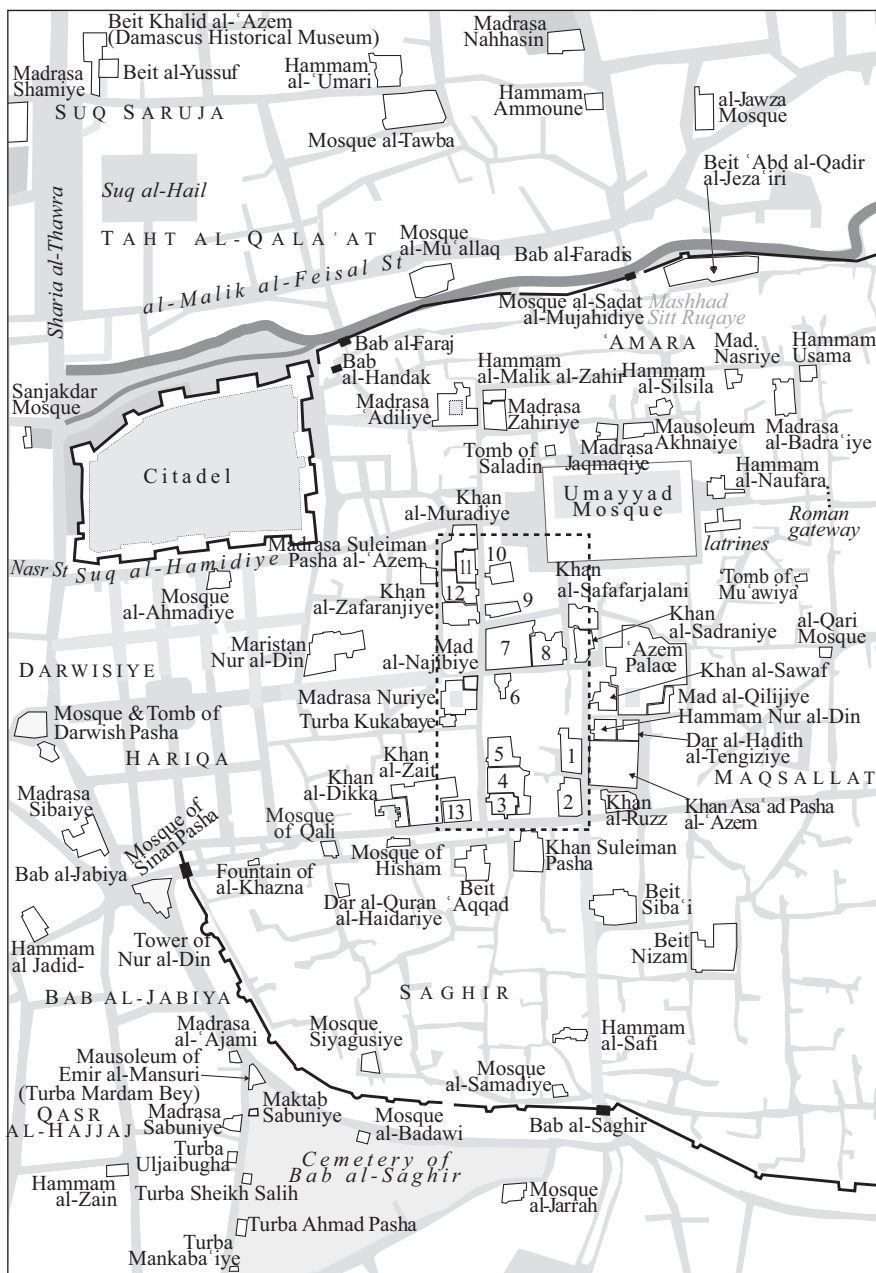


MAP 0a Damascus – historical development

Source: after Abb. 7 K. in Klaus Dettmann (1969) *Damaskus*, Erlangen: Erlangen Geographische Arbeiten.

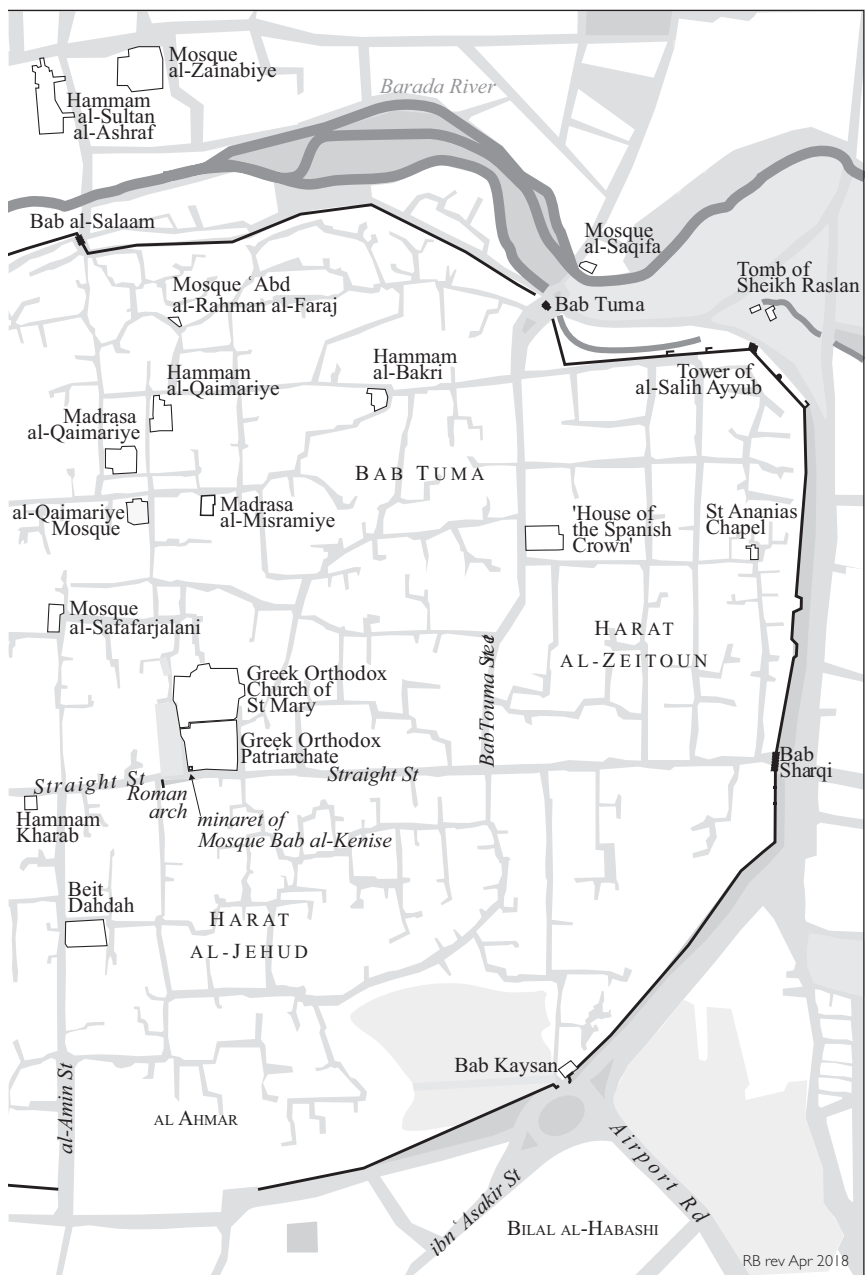


MAP 0b Key to sectoral maps

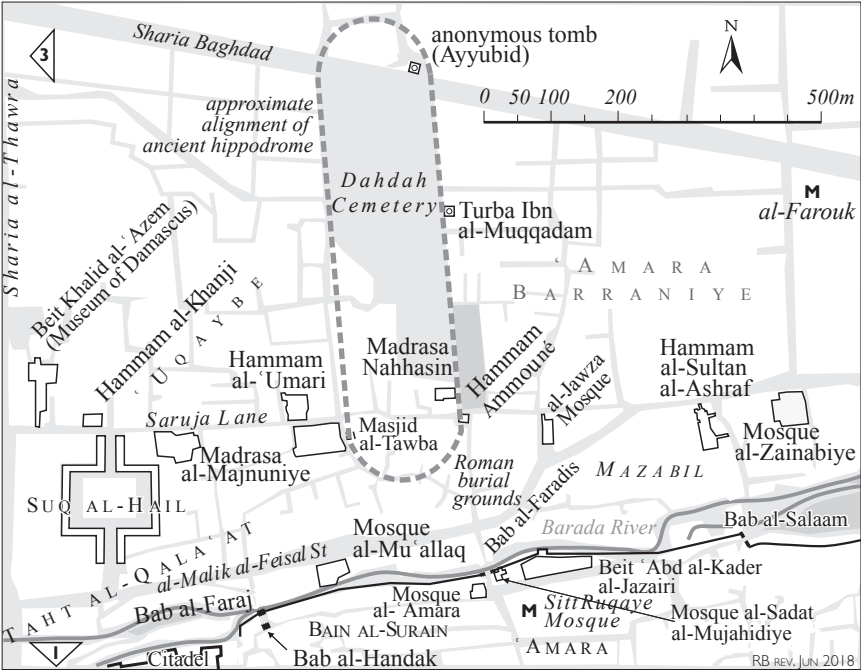


KEY: 1 KHAN AL-AMUD; 2 KHAN AL-FUQANI; 3 HAMMAM AL-HAYYATINI; 4 KHAN AL-JUHIYE;
5 MADRASA AS'AD PASHA AL-'AZEM; 6 MADRASA 'ABDULLAH AL-'AZEM;

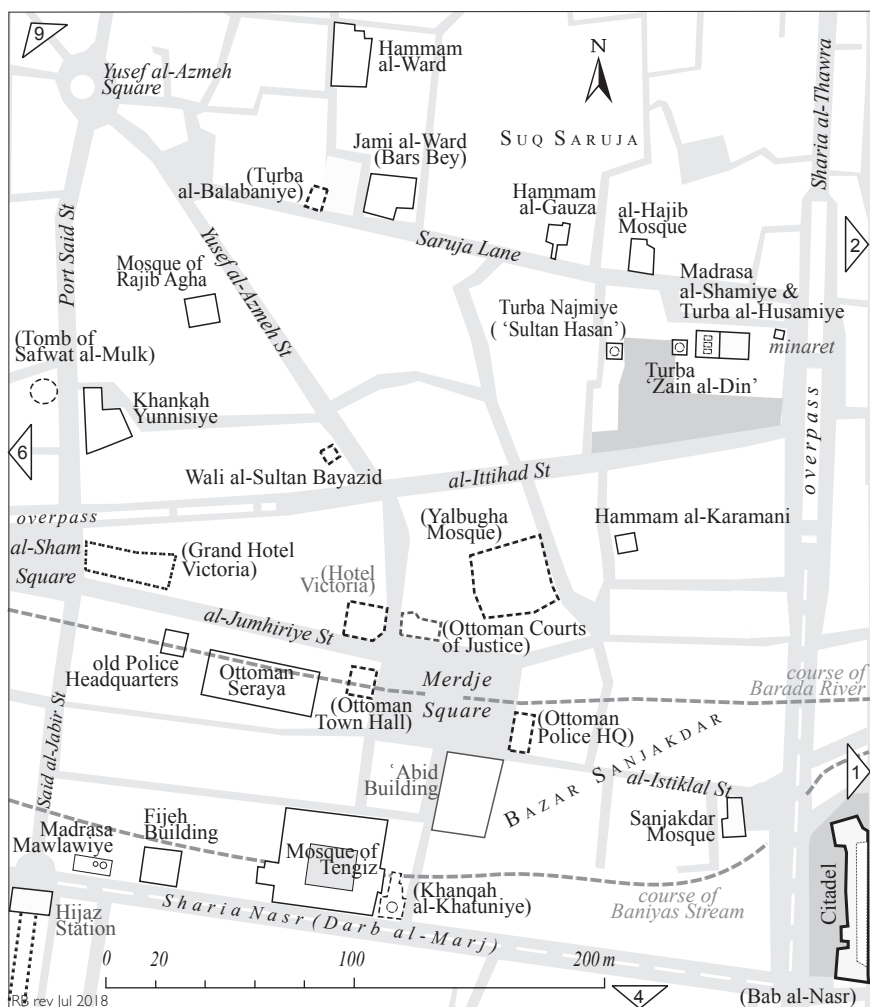
MAP 1 The Walled City



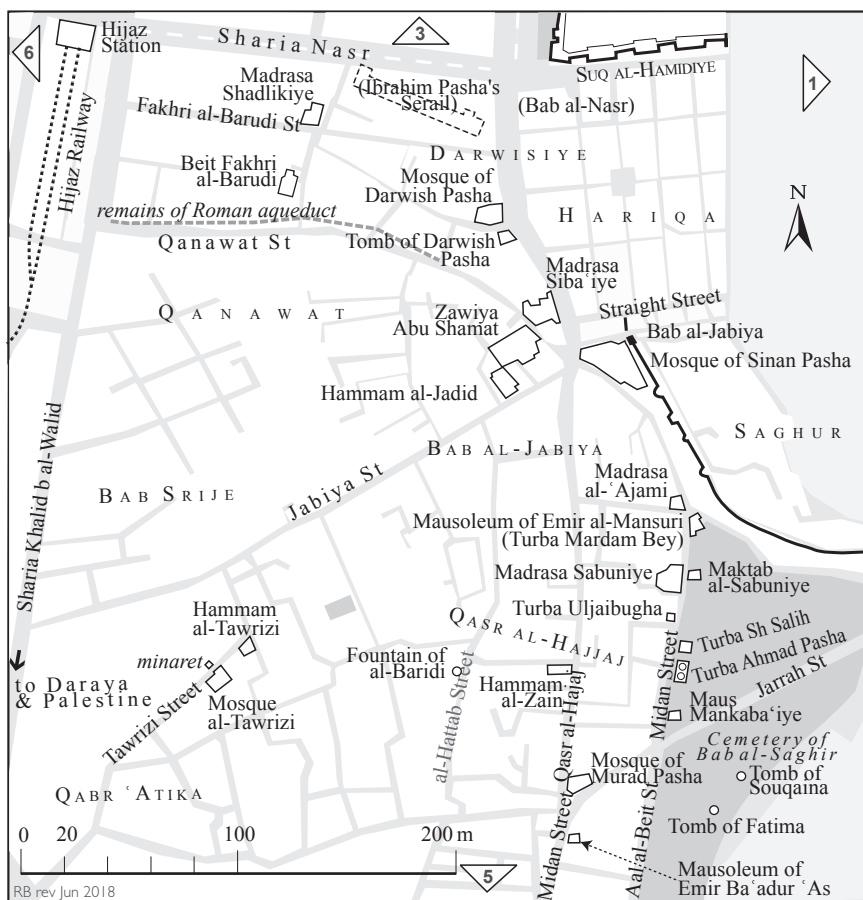
7 KHAN AL-HARIR; 8 KHAN AL-TUTUN; 9 HAMMAM AL-QISHANI; 10 KHAN AL-HARAMIN;
11 KH AL-SH. QATANA; 12 KHAN AL-JUMRUK; 13 KHAN JAQMAQ



MAP 2 'Uqaybe, Amina



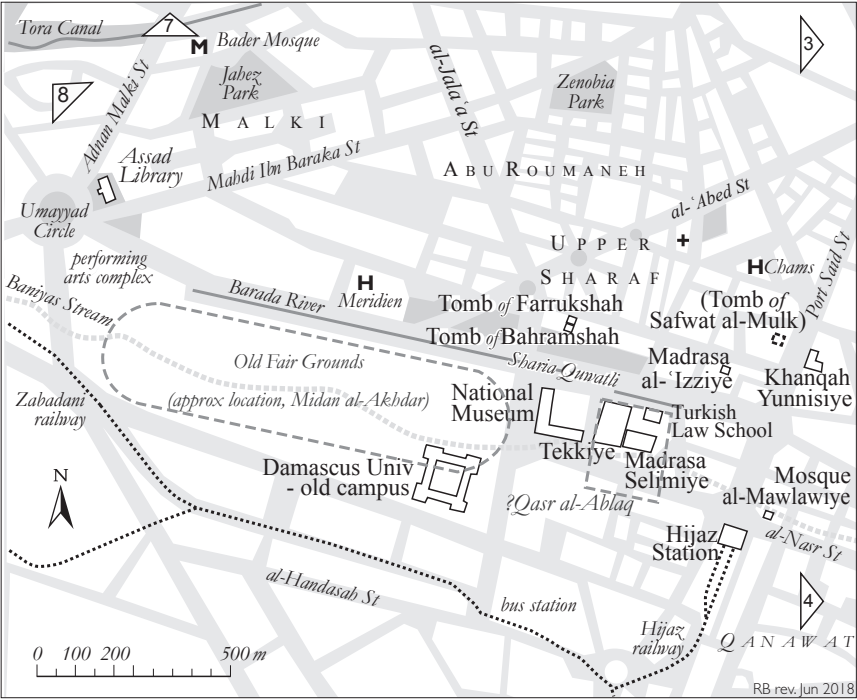
MAP 3 Merdje, Saruja



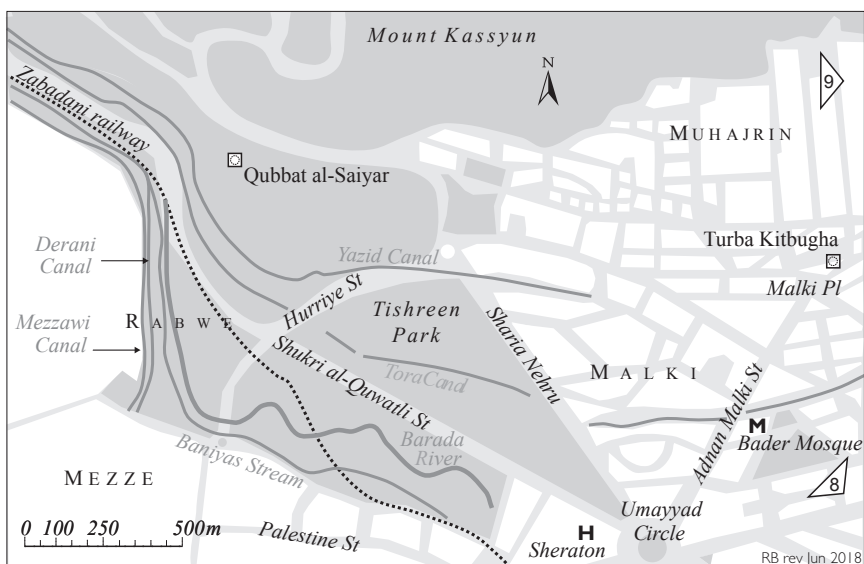
MAP 4 Qanawat, Hajjaj



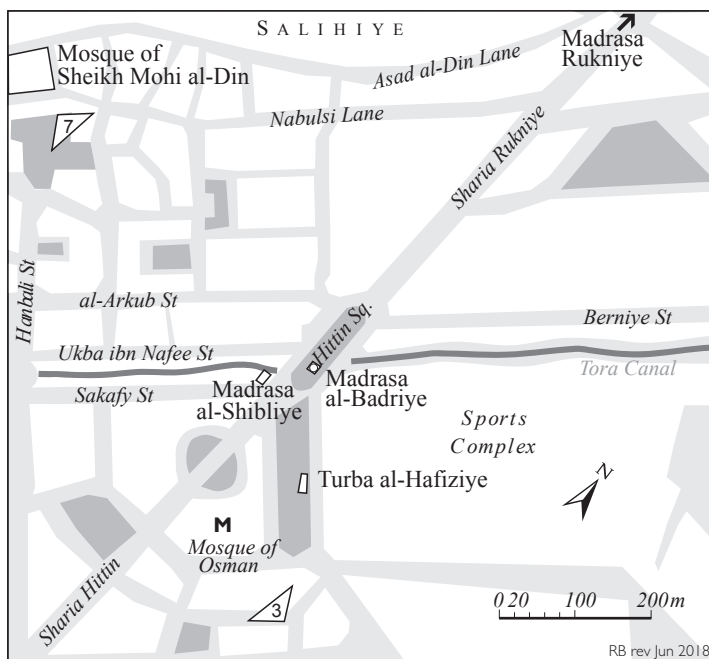
MAP 5 Midan



MAP 6 Sharaf



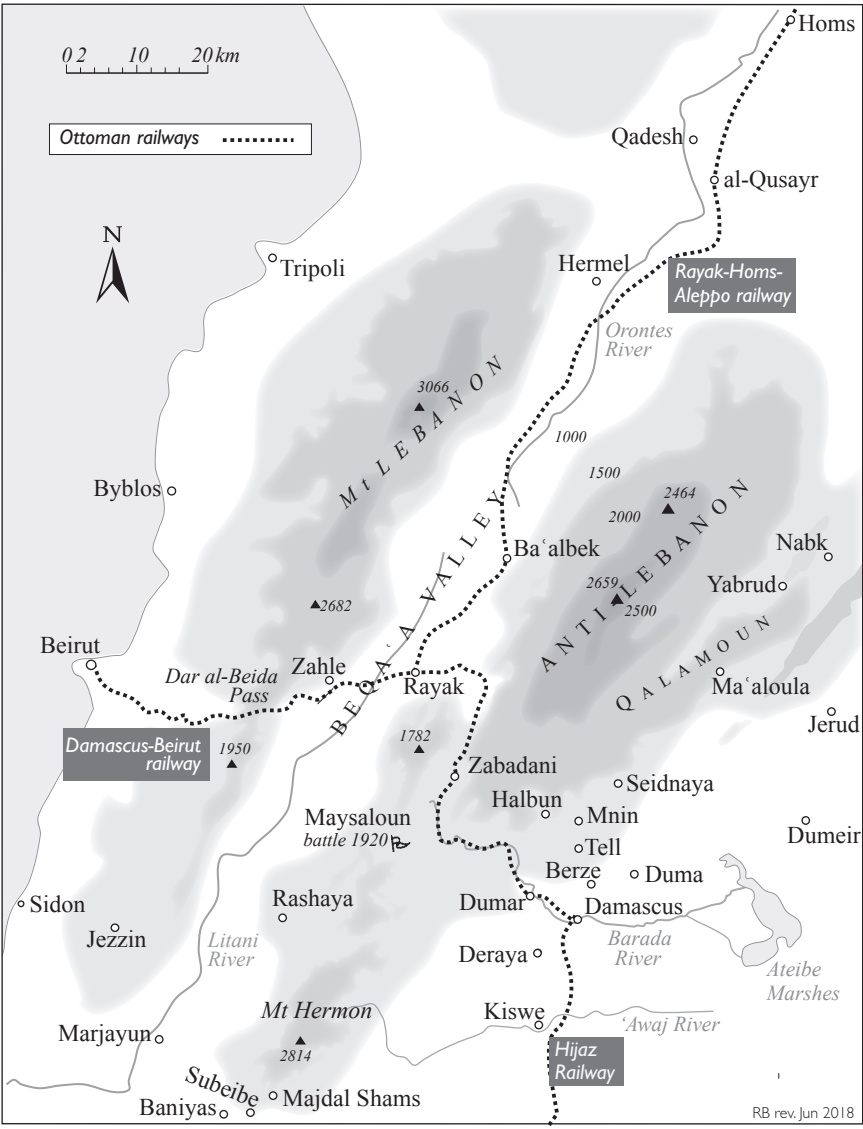
MAP 8 Muhajrin, Rabwe



MAP 9 Hittin Square



MAP 10 The Ghouta and its villages



MAP 11 Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon ranges

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For the purpose of establishing common alphabetical order, I have omitted the Arab article (*al-*) unless incorporated in an author's Anglicised surname (e.g. Alsayyad) but included such prefixes as *ibn*. 'Ain and hamza are also not used to establish order. European names commencing with *de*, *van*, *von*, etc. are read as part of the surname.

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